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Education for Sustainability and beyond: contemplating collapse

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Abstract

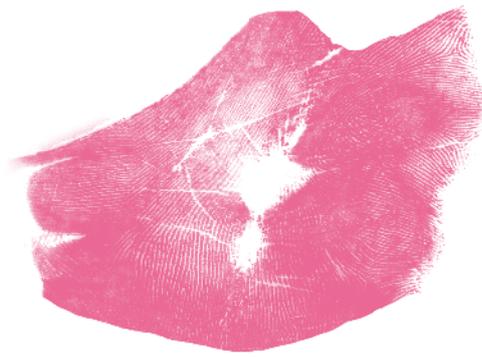
A scan of scientific literature reveals clearly that spiralling population and consumption is undermining the ability of the Earth to support human life. A scan of political discourse suggests that despite the rhetoric of sustainable development there is very little will to drastically reduce production and consumption, quite the opposite in fact. The unstoppable force of economic expansion looks set to meet the immovable object of environmental limits, and something has to give. This article explores the educational implications of collapse and argues for the importance of equipping students with the ability to break conventions, exercise creativity, and invent new stories to base life on in the very different conditions of the world to come.

A recent University and College Union guidance leaflet on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) gives the following examples of how sustainability can be embedded in the curriculum:

- Learners on courses, such as technology and construction, can study for additional qualifications in sustainable development...

- Motor vehicle students can learn about alternative technologies...
- Engineering tutors can introduce energy-related topics into students' projects.
- The computing team can teach learners about communication and control systems which save energy.
- Art teachers can use recyclable materials. (UCU, 2010)

This particular selection of examples reflects some fairly common assumptions about education for sustainability: that sustainability problems can be solved through technology, that the main goal is greater energy efficiency, that sustainability is predominantly a matter for science and engineering students, and that the contribution of arts subjects is through the materials used rather than the content of the curriculum. On a spectrum from shallow to deep, I would place such ideas in the extreme shallow end since a focus on better and more efficient technology leaves the social and cultural structures that underpin an unsustainable society unexamined and unchallenged. In a world where a growing population is demanding ever increasing levels of consumption, making things more efficiently simply means that even more things can be produced and consumed. The deeper level involves addressing the demand in the first place, through the search for paths towards meaningful lives and wellbeing that do not depend on excess consumption. This makes sustainability a social, cultural and spiritual issue as much as, if not more than, an engineering one.



The Dark Mountain Project

In an article published previously in *Networks* (Stibbe, 2009) I attempted to explore how a deeper level could be addressed though involving students in critiquing the discourses on which the unsustainable society around them is based. Students could, for example, raise questions about how we conceptualise and represent consumerism, economic growth, progress, convenience, efficiency, corporate success, innovation and countless other areas where current ways of thinking may be contributing to the destruction of the systems that human life depends on. The idea is that if students can critically analyse the limitations of the discourses of the society around them then they may be able to create or promote alternative discourses to help make society more sustainable, whether through journalism, creative writing, photography or a range of forms of artwork.

There is, however, the pressing question of timing. I find myself increasingly agreeing with those who say that social and discursive change is something that takes a significant amount of time and the involvement of a great number of people, whereas issues such as peak oil, climate change, water scarcity, energy security, and biodiversity loss are urgent and immediate. If it proves too late to create change at a deep enough level to adequately respond to the end of the era of cheap fossil fuel, stable climate and plentiful biodiversity then the future conditions of the planet may be very different from the ones that the current civilisation developed in.

Stephen Quilley (2009, p.43) cautions against education that is based on the assumption of 'continuity' - the assumption that the future that education is preparing students for is going to be much like the present. Instead he raises the possibility that the future students face may involve 'discontinuity' - systemic failure, geopolitical conflict and social, economic and ecological collapse. Those who speak of collapse are still often labelled neo-Malthusian, alarmists, or religious extremists preaching the apocalypse, despite overwhelming scientific evidence of the scale of what needs to be done to avoid collapse and the increasingly obvious lack of political will to do it. There are, however, a variety of new movements, which are preparing for a very different future, and they are beginning to be taken more seriously. One of the most interesting movements from the perspective of ADM subjects is the Dark Mountain Project, which, like Quilley (2009), questions the assumption of continuity:

The pattern of ordinary life, in which so much stays the same from one day to the next, disguises the fragility of its fabric. How many of our activities are made possible by the impression of stability that pattern gives? So long as it repeats, or varies steadily enough, we are able to plan for tomorrow as if all the things we rely on and don't think about too carefully will still be there. When the pattern is broken...many of those activities become impossible or meaningless, while simply meeting needs we once took for granted may occupy much of our lives
(Dark Mountain, 2010).

There is no reason to assume, according to the Dark Mountain Project, that the current pattern of life can or will continue, and plenty of evidence that it cannot for very much longer. In fact, it always was an inescapable aspect of the concept of sustainability that current societies in developed countries are unsustainable, meaning that they cannot continue indefinitely on the path that they are currently on. It is not, therefore, just a moral imperative that industrial civilisation 'should' reduce the rate at which it is extracting resources and the amount of waste and ecological destruction it is causing. Instead unsustainability means the hard fact that industrial civilisation, as it is currently conceived, is eroding the base on which it depends for its continuing survival, and will end. That much is self evident, but the important question is whether the end will involve a painless transition to a more sustainable form of civilisation (which seems increasingly unlikely), social and ecological collapse, or, perhaps, a mixture of both, to different degrees in different locations, and occurring as a 'long emergency' (Kunstler, 2005) rather than a sudden event.

Whatever the future holds, it is abundantly clear that education cannot be focused, as so many official policy documents demand, on preparing students to take their place within an industrial society and contribute to further industrialisation, further economic growth, financial prosperity, international competitiveness, and the production and consumption of even more goods and services. Whether desirable or not, that trajectory cannot continue indefinitely and the limits are increasingly obvious and imminent. Instead, if the ultimate implication of 'unsustainability' is considered, education must now be a preparation for what comes next, after the end of industrial civilisation. Post collapse, priorities may shift to such things as the preservation of vital knowledge from the past, the creation of >>



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pockets of resilience in the face of economic, climatic, and ecological disruption, and, for those who remain, the forging of new ways to live based on very different principles.

The Dark Mountain Project has been criticised from a variety of angles, including the idea that it advocates 'giving up' on environmentalism or that it gleefully looks forward to the end of civilisation. Its importance, however, lies both in the fact that it is prepared to consider the very obvious possibility that efforts to create a sustainable society will not succeed, and because it places arts disciplines at the heart of re-inventing the basis of communities and societies. Contemplation of collapse, as the other face of the coin of sustainability, raises profound questions about teaching practice, about relationships between lecturers and students, about assessment and, at a deep level, about what it means to be a lecturer in an unsustainable, and (perhaps) an unremittingly and irreversibly unsustainable, society. This article can only make a few comments in response to these issues, with the aim of stimulating further debate rather than a providing a comprehensive discussion.

The first comment is that I think it still remains necessary for students to question the underlying social and cultural structures that underpin an unsustainable society. The purpose of doing so, however, is no longer the unrealistic expectation that students can contribute to transformation at a large enough scale in a short enough time to make society sustainable. Instead the aim is to expose and record unsustainable social structures so that, post collapse, those people that survive can search for a very different basis for their emerging communities and societies. Alastair McIntosh describes how a statue by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi provides a solid reminder for future generations about the follies of a form of technology, which promised a lot but ended up being heavily criticised for its negative social and environmental impact in the hands of transnational corporations:

Outside the new Michael Swann biotechnology building at Edinburgh University stand two bronze human figures sculpted by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi. He has named them in Greek, Parthenope and Egeria. The artist's brief was to reflect the 'aspirations' of those working within the building. Astonishingly, or perhaps not so, the Faculty of Science and Engineering accepted and has proudly displayed these two Frankenstein-like creations. Their bodies have parts horribly cut off. Bits are replaced by machines, metal plates

and cogwheels. Poor Egeria is upside down. Parthenope's eyes are being violently forced open as if too say ... TINA - "there is no alternative." Rarely in the history of false gods could a more telling pair of graven images have been conceived. The statues betray a demi-humanity in which nature's proportionality has been brutally ousted by technology's angularity. Parthenope and Egeria are the creations of man become God-gone-wrong. They stand for Mary Shelley vindicated (1998).

Providing critiques of the basis of an unsustainable society (e.g. through artwork and eloquent analysis of artwork such as the above) is the first stage. The next stage is the search for new foundations for building communities and societies on that can function better, or function at all, in what follows industrial civilisation. The Dark Mountain Project expresses this as a search for new 'stories':

- We believe that the roots of [social and ecological] crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths.
- We will reassert the role of story-telling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality...We will celebrate writing and art which is grounded in a sense of place and of time. (Dark Mountain, 2010)

If this approach is applied to higher education, students are cast in the role of storytellers, retelling the stories that they base their lives on and reshaping social reality in the process. Of course we cannot be sure what stories will prove adequate to base communities on in the future, but we can be sure that the current stories of unlimited economic expansion or human separation from a mechanistic natural world will not serve. It is essential, therefore, to instigate the process of reinventing a wide range of new stories with the hope that some will serve better than the current ones.

The concept of a 'story', however, needs to be taken metaphorically rather than just literally. The stories we need are not just those found in works obviously labelled as art or poetry or fiction, but stories which are infused so deeply within the culture they can sit quite unremarkably within economic textbooks, news reports, business letters, or biology



Images: A. Stibbe

textbooks. The term 'discourse' is useful for 'stories' in this wider sense, with discourses being both particular ways of speaking, writing, drawing, photographing and filming, and the conceptualisations and models of the world that underlie these ways.

To gain inspiration for new discourses, students may have to step outside of the university campus and seek out those who have skills in living graciously with far fewer material possessions, those who manage to gain a deep sense of wellbeing in ways which do not require vast amounts of material consumption. These are not middle class people in developed countries with solar panels on their roofs, but people from the kind of place-based communities that tend to be labelled 'poor' or 'deprived' rather than 'sustainable', both in the UK and within traditional cultures across the world. The New Economics Forum's 'Happy Planet Index' (2010) describes Costa Rica as the country that has highest levels of wellbeing with minimal use of resources, and it is useful to explore the stories that such communities are based on and the ways that art and writing express those stories. It is particularly interesting to explore how art is infused into everyday practices, possessions, buildings and crafts in these cultures, and the role that this art-within-life plays in improving peoples lives when material consumption is severely constrained.

If students are challenging the conventions and precepts of the society around them and searching for alternatives in diverse places far from the classroom then this raises issues about the types of knowledge valued by universities and the way that student work is assessed. In some disciplines the assessment system seems designed to guide students into performing a social identity that mimics that of a professional academic, whatever the interests, viewpoints and future goals of the student might be, and whatever the conditions of the world happen to be. This is particularly true for the traditional dissertation, where conventional ways of researching, structuring and writing are often presented merely as 'right', 'proper' or 'good' rather than as one particular discourse among many possibilities.

It is important for students to recognise that the education system in an unsustainable society may be partly responsible for reproduction of that society. Reproducing society is problematic not just because society is imperfect and unequal (a transformationalist argument) but because it is unsustainable and therefore cannot be reproduced for very much longer anyway. It therefore becomes important for

students to gain skills not just in adhering to narrow disciplinary ways of expressing themselves (what Hayes-Conroy and Vanderbeck (2005, p.315) call conformative identity work) but also in breaking those conventions and forging new identities which are more in tune with the conditions of the world around them (*critical* identity work). This is being critical not just in the prescribed ways that the discipline requires, but going beyond that to critique the basis of the discipline itself and the identities it is trying to guide students into (for example, the identity of an emotionless, disembodied, objective observer separate from the world he/she is observing).

The challenge for academia is to find assessment tasks which allow students the freedom to express themselves in ground-breaking, creative new ways that go far beyond the discursive models of the world that the discipline is based on (see Stibbe, forthcoming). It is in the area of resisting conventions and seeking new identities that arts subjects have so much to offer, since creativity and the ability to challenge conventions is an essential part of what it means to be an arts graduate. In some ADM disciplines there are already creative alternatives to the traditional dissertation, and these are currently being examined by a National Teaching Fellowship (NTFS) project (Creative Hops, 2010) which is searching for new forms of creative honours project that can help students prepare for an uncertain future.

To summarise, then, some would argue that it would go beyond optimism to total denial to think that education can be transformed in time to allow students to make the current society sustainable, and an unsustainable society means one that will collapse, as many past civilisations have (Diamond, 2005). Collapse does not necessarily mean a sudden apocalypse, but could involve the gradual unravelling of an industrial civilisation and the stories, discourses, models, and conceptions that underpin it. At some point those who survive will need to find new stories and conceptions to live their lives by and will need leaders who can both critique what came before and have the creativity to build alternatives. Sustainability is therefore far from being a matter just for engineering and science students - arts subjects have an essential role to play in opening up ways of living in a very different future, and insights from arts disciplines can help inform other disciplines across the university.

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Biography

Arran Stibbe has an academic background in both linguistics and human ecology, and combines the two in his teaching and research into ecolinguistics and Education for Sustainability. He is a senior lecturer in English Language at the University of Gloucestershire, a National Teaching Fellow, and a fellow of the Centre for Active Learning. He has published widely in the area of ecolinguistics and is convener of the Language and Ecology Research Forum (www.ecoling.net).

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