

SUSTAINABILITY LITERACY: TWO PERSPECTIVES

In this chapter two authors, Paul Vare and John Blewitt, offer differing perspectives on the value, usefulness and dangers of the term ‘sustainability literacy’.

Sustainability Literacy: role or goal?

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Is it worth squabbling over the term ‘literacy’; shouldn’t we just get on with the business of saving the planet (or rather, ourselves?) Yes, let’s get started and transform the world. Follow me!

But wait, they’re not following. There’s another ‘expert’ over there who’s shouting louder, says she has Science on her side – and now Damian here says he’s greener than all of us. Or does he mean more literate?

If sustainable development was simply a matter of our becoming ‘sustainability literate’, wouldn’t we have defined the syllabus by now and cracked the problem?

The term ‘literacy’ is persuasive precisely because it makes the job sound more straightforward than it is. In a discussion during the *Soundings in Sustainability Literacy* event at the University of Gloucestershire, we learned that the term ‘sustainability literacy’ was initially promoted by Forum for the Future as a way of encouraging ‘buy in’ from the corporate world. The aim was to market sustainability rather than propose a litany that everyone should follow. As with all marketing terms, the aim was to grab attention (which it has done) rather than open up a concept to critique. But now we are left using this handy shorthand term that is not best suited to the nature of learning for sustainability.

If I felt that this objection arose simply out of my being an awkward character who dislikes being told what to do, I wouldn’t take the trouble to contribute to this volume. However, I am deeply concerned that by focusing chiefly on ‘sustainability literacy’ we are diminishing our chances of success in our common goal of working towards a more sustainable world.

I have argued elsewhere (Vare and Scott 2007) for a view of education for sustainable development (ESD) that *balances* ESD 1: an instrumental approach involving information giving and prescribed positive behaviour change, and ESD 2: a more emancipatory approach that involves building capacity to think critically about and beyond sustainability messages. Promoting sustainability literacy appears to be ESD 1 writ large but this is half of the story. The issue is not whether there are patently useful things for us to know and do in relation to sustainability but whether this, in itself, is *the goal*.

In a world characterised by complexity and uncertainty, our long-term survival lies less in our ability to ‘apply the grammar’ and more in our willingness to bend the rules in unforeseen circumstances and even operate beyond our level of knowledge as we make our world anew.

ESD 2 focuses on questions of pedagogy, such as ways of giving learners authentic opportunities to practise democracy, reflect on some of the inherent contradictions in sustainability and to make their own decisions. This *could* be done without sustainability literacy/ESD 1 but it would be half the story.

Consistent with ESD 1, sustainability literacy can assist us in recognising the systemic connections across topics, understanding the precautionary principle, judging the extent to which development models align with ecological concepts and so forth. What this literacy cannot guarantee is that we have the *disposition and values* to apply our learning throughout our lives and in our dealings with others. This willing mastery and valuing of sustainability is something we arrive at within ourselves and among our communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), not as a result of being cajoled to do so.

Literacy *per se*, involves reading, writing interpreting and manipulating printed and written materials; this skill can be achieved across large populations because there are general agreements on the spelling, pronunciation and meaning of words as well as consistent rules of grammar. However, the greater the agreement on the right way to do things, the less flexible the system becomes.

Computer literacy is a case in point, it can grow as technology develops but it’s troubling to note how most of us have no role in defining the rules. Thus literacy is unlike a spoken language, which we can all modify even as we use it (Giddens in Cassell 1993).

Modern ‘literacies’ in particular (e.g. political, ecological, sustainability) have had little opportunity to develop beyond the monolithic ‘expert’ forces that created them. So computer literacy is a fine skill set to possess, but malleable? Adaptable? Ever noticed how one misplaced keystroke can prevent the whole system from working at all?

For decades we have recognised that literacy is ideological (Street 1984), it always exists in a context, reflecting the values associated with that context. The thought that some body of experts ‘out there’ should define what we all need to know/do/think in relation to sustainability, irrespective of our diverse settings, is quite frankly chilling.

Literacy of any kind has value in providing a basic set of principles but if we didn’t learn beyond – and often *without* – these rules... we wouldn’t have jazz, hip hop, poetry – or even science (Wolpert 1993).

If ESD1 involves becoming literate, perhaps ESD 2 is akin to the enjoyment of story-telling; I know which I find more life-affirming. Sustainability literacy may have a role – it is not the goal.

Sustainability Literacy: a problematic concept?

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Not so long ago **sustainability literacy** was all the rage. We needed the knowledge, skills and understanding required to fashion a more sustainable future. Articles were published, workshops convened, websites designed and curriculum guidance issued or at least suggested. Today a different mood is emerging whereby ‘sustainability literacy’ is considered, at the very least, somewhat problematic. This is interesting not least because media literacy, computer literacy, visual literacy, intercultural literacy and a whole host of other literacies seem to be attracting increasing interest. Of course, there is always the definitional problem which beset other literacies in the recent past. What was meant exactly by ‘political literacy’ led to all sorts of academic and ideological discussions which were partly resolved through exhaustion and partly by government re-articulating and institutionalising political literacy as (good) citizenship. Sir Bernard Crick enabled citizenship education to be enacted variously and creatively in UK schools at a time when strict central control and direction was imposed on a troubled national curriculum.

The perceived problem with the term ‘literacy’ may arise from the way the term has been narrowly defined, unimaginatively taught and indifferently executed. Consequently, for too many educators, literacy has become associated with the three “Rs”, reading hours and SATS tests. Perhaps though, educators as well as the popular press and broadcasting media take too many of their cues about education from schooling and school based learning. As Ivan Illich (1973) noted many years ago, society needs to be de-schooled and educators perhaps re-educated, for there is nothing inherently wrong or controversial with the term literacy.

For the radical Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1972), literacy was about conscientization, empowerment, social transformation and liberation. For David Barton (2002), whose work on adult local literacies is of immense value, literacy is integral to practice and cannot, and should not even for analytical purposes, be divorced from human socio-political action. Indeed, if we look at the changing applications of literacy in relation to both new and old media we see that the term is generally understood as integrating practice and knowledge, skills and (or perhaps in) understanding. As the world changes so do our skills, knowledge, practices and understanding. If I retained the same level of computer literacy I had in 1992 I probably would be hard pressed to switch on my iphone today. And maybe sustainability literacy is a little like that too – dynamic, fluid, applied, changing – but with a set of key principles at the core. In 1992, the environmental educator David Orr (1992; 92) wrote:

The ecologically literate person has the knowledge necessary to comprehend inter-relatedness, and an attitude of care or stewardship. Such a person would have the practical competence required to act on the basis on knowledge and feeling. Competence can only be derived from the experience of doing and the mastery of what Alisdair MacIntyre describes as a “practice”. Knowledge, caring and practical competence constitute the basis of ecological literacy.

Some years on we may wish to question the use of the terms stewardship and competence. Given the uncertainties and risks that currently face human civilization we would be wiser to develop our understanding of ‘capabilities’ instead. However, for a sustainability literate

person we would also need to ensure the inter-relatedness incorporates a practical understanding of how human agency is necessarily both individual and collective and how human conduct occurs within an environment as well as by means of an environment. Literacy is a plural concept with diverse literacies shaped by their use in particular contexts and which in turn serve to shape those contexts. Literacy is consequently *agentive*. In other words, we need to be pragmatic in our actions and in our intellectual apprehension and application of concepts. As Wittgenstein wrote, the meaning of a term is derived from how it is used. So, if the term literacy is used to encompass both knowledge and doing things, what is the problem with the term ‘sustainability literacy’?

It may not be literacy which is the problem but *sustainability* and its co-respondent, *sustainable development*. The two are often conflated, incessantly debated, sometimes dismissed and frequently misunderstood and misused. The problem here is again not a definitional one as there are plenty of well trodden woolly concepts that are also subject to numerous definitional realities. Just think of ‘democracy’ or ‘community’. The problem with sustainability is that it requires meaning schemes and perspectives that are at once holistic, multi-vocal and pragmatic, and we are not there yet. At present we just don’t think like that, but then what is point of education?

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