

THE EMERGING PARADIGM

Geoff Fagan, Director CADISPA, University of Strathclyde

Where two or three are gathered together – there must education be.

How is it possible after one hundred and forty years of public education in the UK that whole sections of our population can be deemed uneducated? How was it that research or ‘finding out’ has been allowed to be usurped by the educational elite when it is the most natural everyday activity and used daily and in depth by every parent or pensioner - constituting normal, day to day living for millions of people. How can it be that the learning people have done in solving everyday problems of sustainable living can be, in some way, discounted as learning that is not of real importance: a second class of knowing that fails to reach the standard that would justify it as worthy of lasting recognition?

The hard reality is that the very learning and research celebrated as being worthy of being passed on to new learners, has led us into a situation where the world is facing a crisis of incredible proportions. It was not those people trying to make their own lives and their communities more sustainable that led the economic system and the great financial and commercial institutions to the brink of collapse. The Dominant Discourse that allowed and encouraged the perpetuation of bankrupt ideas was one of greed, unfairness, individualism and waste. This Dominant Discourse celebrated competition, downgraded mutuality and used the formal educational processes to filter people out of true opportunity and away from the recognition of ordinary people as being knowledgeable, connected and able learners.

However, a new Discourse is emerging: an alternative discourse. One that lies at a tangent to that described above. The impact that this will have on learners and education will be profound. This alternative discourse is in the ascendancy and at this time occupies Foucault’s ‘change space’ – poised and waiting at the point where the dominant discourse has cracked. For Foucault, this is where paradigm change will happen – either that or the dominant discourse will heal itself. There is not a moment to lose if we are serious about true social change.

This new Discourse has sustainable literacy at its core and holds within it the axiom that simply ‘to know or to know about’ is not sufficient. The purpose of knowing is to act: to live the new knowledge. In this new discourse mutuality and connectivity is celebrated and required. To live a particular lifestyle that, knowingly, impacts detrimentally on a neighbour – be that an individual living in the next house – or a country in the next Region, cannot, arguably, be tolerated. To know of poverty in the economically developing world and not use that knowledge to act to relieve it, could be considered unethical. This position holds profound implications for politicians, schools and universities.

The skills needed to implement sustainability depend on how sustainability is defined. The Egan Review (2004) listed thirteen necessary skills for building a sustainable community in seven arenas or components. However, this identification of a skill set for sustainability is too simple. It assumes that by simply learning and then operationalising those skills, learners will be able to build a sustainable community for themselves. This is not the case because any use of those skills without first changing the discourse or value base that underpins them will simply perpetuate what we have now – but with greater efficiency. A reassessment of core values is necessary: then the application of skills.

This reassessment of the underpinning principles will involve a fundamental shift in the way that our society is organised and in the perception of what ordinary people can do. It will challenge the domination of representative democracy, replacing it with a participatory democratic process. It will challenge too the notion that people don't already understand what constitutes local sustainable living and it will embrace the notion of *asset harvesting* - the acceptance that, lying within all communities today there exists a sufficiency of people perfectly equipped and sufficiently educated to be able to put in place Sustainable Development without having to re-train or be re-educated. This is a radical shift in the 'commonsense position' where people are thought to be in deficit, in need of training, before they can engage. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Sustainability literacy involves a wider and deeper understanding of our impact on the world – but also and importantly, captures the connectedness between dominant discourses, political and education systems and structures and the expectations and assumptions we hold of an 'uneducated' populace. There is, of course, no such thing as an uneducated person.

This is the starting point for the definition of a sustainable literacy. It involves the active searching out of alternative paradigms of thinking; the development of new skills sets associated with those new directions and an acceptance that it is ordinary learners in everyday life who can and will solve the problems we are now experiencing.

As an example of a new set of emergent discourses the International Association for Public Participation, based in Denver USA, has produced a set of core values for local engagement. It is a set of principles about local engagement that guides all their work. The core values of IAP2 are these:

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are most affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.

6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.
(IAP2 Core Values 2009)

These are important because they start from a position that accepts and celebrates the value of input from those people who are immediately affected by a set of development decisions. The IAP2 code of practice asks that local people be treated as equals. It recognises that they bring priceless knowledge to the table and hold, collectively, the wisdom to juggle differing needs and demands because they know their place so well. This, through the application of the IAP2 Core Values to development practice, enables local people and commercial developers in partnership - to understand the complexity of critical and complicated material. There is no substitute for this lived understanding. It is a valued commodity not to be squandered.

This celebration of the local and the acceptance of local asset harvesting is exemplified by the CADISPA (Conservation and Development in Sparsely Populated Areas) Project at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, UK (www.CADISPA.org). CADISPA is based on the notion that sustainable development is only, truly meaningful when it is locally driven, and has 52 demonstration projects across the most sparsely populated areas of Scotland.

Each community is struggling to put in place a more sustainable future, 'for themselves – by themselves' and, in the process, learning at great depth the core facets of sustainability literacy and sustainable living. CADISPA is a learning community of practice – where sustainability is being reinterpreted by local people into something that they can recognise, to which they can subscribe and which fits their immediate context and view of their world. It is based on Community Education principles and the skills of being a community educator. This involves enabling every member of the population and particularly those in leadership capacities to become self and community educators. The kind of skills needed in this new paradigm of place-based-learning are those associated with 'communication and presentation; problem solving and creativity; the efficient use of information technology; teamwork and collaboration; project planning and organising and personal development' (University of Strathclyde 2008).

Each group is working at their own pace, with their own negotiated learning programme and at a level of learning that suits the individual members of the group. All the learning is project-based, in that local people choose a development on which to work which is in keeping with their sustainability plan for their community. The unique part of the CADISPA experience is that the local project, chosen by the community as a necessary part of their future sustainability, is the vehicle that captures and directs the learning. It is such a simple yet profound idea. Research, risk assessment, design, funding, politics, community mandating, project management, sustainability, teamwork and group dynamics – all subjects are covered. Most of it is hidden: few people would recognise what they were doing was in any way to do with learning. However, with the aid of an educational worker (the field worker) and through self directed study, it is learning that is appropriate to the moment, is in real time, and shaped around activity that is grounded in the reality of their place.

The role of the educational facilitator, in CADISPA's case from the University of Strathclyde, is crucial. There is no teaching or training involved. The field workers support and encourage (of course) but, more importantly, enable each group to take a critical relationship to both the accepted wisdom and to the process of learning. The workers job is to listen actively and, through a process of critical questioning, help the group build a clear picture of what needs to be done. The field workers help the group assess the options and the risks of particular actions. They help people understand what the internet or other experts are telling them – and support the learners as they, small step by small step, move their project forward.

So, how does this process fit any accepted definition of education? There is no teaching. No accepted wisdom passed down from Professor to student. No single set of skills that, like a set of trusty spanners, can be made to fit each and every circumstance.

The story of Brazil's approach to HIV/AIDS is one of recognising the existing energy and resources in the system. By widening the definition of resources, social innovators were able to draw on an abundance invisible to others (Westly et al 2006: 138)

This education is dynamic, it's moving yet located. It is reinvented each time a new project or a new dimension to the same project comes to light. It is relevant, timely and purposeful. It reflects Friere's position that the purpose of knowing is to act. One of the principles that CADISPA follows is that local people, collectively, hold most of the knowledge they will need to solve their own sustainability problems – and, in doing so, address some of the key elements of sustainability: engagement, ecological sensitivity, responsibility for local wealth creation, alternative thinking and real time learning. This is a critical pedagogy – a transformational education.

This education by critical conversation can be done everywhere and anywhere. Where two or three people are gathered together lends both the learning opportunity and the location. It matters not whether the learning takes place in a village hall, a café when closed in the evening or a young people's drop-in centre. It could happen in a University/Community partnership programme; in a medical centre or a police station: location is of no concern. What is crucial is that the learning is focussed, linked and grounded in the reality of the learners and has a clear purpose in delivering social change, an improvement in the quality of life of the learners – and action to redress social or environmental inequality.

This education has an output: the conclusion of the project, and transferable outcomes: new sets of skills and critical understandings of the underlying principles associated with sustainability, engagement and action. CADISPA represents a partnership to learning on a variety of levels. It educates quietly and carefully and always at the pace and within the parameters of what is acceptable to local people. It drives the development of new knowledge from a sector of the population that, ordinarily, would not see themselves as being in the vanguard of knowledge development. It accepts that local people are well educated, capable and hold within their community all the skills and knowledge necessary to build a sustainable future for themselves.

So, if the test of a successful learning programme is an increased ability to demonstrate both the principles of sustainable literacy – and to show, and know in depth, how to build a

sustainable future, then a non-formal, critical conversation and educational practice of the kind demonstrated by the CADISPA Project can help us in developing new discourses in both education and sustainability – and might, perhaps, be a way ahead.

CADISPA. www.CADISPA.org

Egan Review (2004) *Skills for Sustainable Communities*. CLG UK government.

Feagin, J. and V. Hernan (2001) *Liberation Sociology*. Boulder: Westview Press

Freire, P. (1974) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin

IAP2 (2009). www.iap2.org

Kincheloe, J. (2008) *Critical Pedagogy* (2nd Edition) Peter Lang Publishing New York

Orr, D (1994) *Earth in Mind*. Washington: Island Press

Sterling, S R (2001) *Sustainable Education: Revisioning Learning and Change*. Schumacher Briefing 6. Dartington: Green Books

Westly, F., B. Zimmerman and M. Patton (2006) *Getting to Maybe*. Toroto: Vintage