

Sustainable development: challenge or opportunity?

Sara Parkin OBE, Programme Director, Forum for the Future

'... the people who will succeed fifteen years from now, the countries which will succeed, are those which are most based on a sustainable vision of the world. That is what we should be training people to do.'

Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP,
secretary of state for education and skills, 25 March 2003

The proposition



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The proposition is that sustainability literacy should join ICT in the canon of essential 21st century literacies. Climate change and inequality

are two examples of unsustainability that already dominate our world. It has become a top priority, therefore, to ensure that everyone who leaves publicly funded education has the capacity to act and choose in a way that contributes to sustainable development.

That means sustainability literacy ought to be integrated into all courses, not relegated to specific subjects or disciplines. Everyone should be able to contribute positively to sustainable development.

The rest of this paper supports this proposition with argument and example.

Why is sustainable development important?

More confusion has gathered around the term sustainable development than it deserves. 'Sustainable' is an adjective that

describes something (in this case the path of human development) that has the capacity to continue into the long-term future. Sustainable development means progressing our economic, social and environmental goals *together*, and avoiding in the future the trade-offs and negative consequences that have arisen from treating them separately.

The evidence of unsustainable development is now driving policy, for example:

- the proof that our demands on the goods and services provided by the natural environment (such as climate regulation and waste processing) is outstripping its capacity to supply them, is most obviously manifest in climate change.ⁱ Also evident is the impact of a dangerous blend of chemicals on human healthⁱⁱ and livestockⁱⁱⁱ
- our current development path seems unable to tackle chronic poverty or prevent growing inequality of all sorts of opportunity such as income, health or environmental quality. Since 1990, for example, a quarter of the world's countries have become poorer, and yet 1 per cent of the world's population earn more than the 57 per cent of the poorest.^{iv}

High-level policy drivers that already affect education for sustainable development include:

- UK government sustainable development strategy: its new version due out in February will have a strong emphasis on implementation^v
- DfES sustainable development action plan^{vi}
- sustainable development entering the European Union's constitution and policy.

And even if government priorities wax and wane through an electoral cycle, equipping everyone with the knowledge and skills to do things differently will remain a real and perpetual policy goal for two reasons:

- we won't be able to avoid tackling the root causes of *unsustainable* development, mitigating the inevitable impacts and trying to prevent further negative consequences
- a successful future economy for the UK will be based on what Tony Blair has described as a 'green industrial revolution'. Future markets will be for secure, affordable supplies of goods and services that are low in carbon production.

Ending our degradation of the earth's environment, being fair to each other and moving into less wasteful ways of doing things is a positive view of the future for new generations to engage with. If this sort of future is to be possible, decisions and actions in every aspect of our lives will have to be made in a way that supports sustainable development, which means people will have to be 'sustainability literate'.

What is sustainability literacy?

A working definition of sustainability literacy came out of Forum for the Future's Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability.^{vii} If you are sustainability literate you will be able to:

- understand the need for change to a sustainable way of doing things, individually and collectively
- have sufficient knowledge and skills to decide and act in a way that favours sustainable development
- be able to recognise and reward other people's decisions and actions that favour sustainable development.

Just as it is not necessary to know how to programme a computer to use ICT successfully, not everyone needs to know complex chemical formulae of environmental pollutants to be sustainability literate. Everybody needs sufficient knowledge and skills, which will be determined by their sphere of influence at home and at work.

Barrier/fallacy	Response
1. It's a hugely complex, vast body of knowledge that goes across many subjects and disciplines, so too much to cover in every course.	NOT TRUE Yes, sustainability crosses through many disciplines as it encompasses everything we do. However most knowledge and skills relating to sustainability are common to all walks of life. The difference is the level to which people need them. School leavers need a basic transferable level; what older learners need to know and be able to do depends on their role, for example what a hairdresser needs to know would be different to an engineer.
2. It's the environment isn't it, and we are dealing with that already.	NOT TRUE Yes, securing a life-supporting environment in the long term is the top priority. But the means for doing that are social (the decisions about how we live with each other and the environment) and economic (valuing environmental goods and services accurately), so they cannot be dealt with separately.
3. It's not relevant to everyone – it belongs in geography or sciences, but not subjects like English, history or music.	NOT TRUE Each subject or discipline can contribute to a learner's sustainability literacy. For example the making of musical instruments can have negative environmental and social impacts in the same way that making coffee or trainers do, but their use can have positive impacts on the building of human and social capital, including celebrating the environment.
4. There's no legal obligation behind it – like there is behind equal opportunities, and anyway, employers are not asking for it.	PARTIALLY TRUE Sustainability straddles all government departments. There is EU legislation and mechanisms like Treasury requirements for sustainability appraisal on spending are being put in place. Failure to mitigate negative impacts now may result in more legislation in the medium term. Employers are beginning to ask for sustainability-literate employees and will want more as the market place changes.
5. It's a political thing, an ideology, and therefore it is not legitimate to put it into the curriculum.	NOT TRUE Or it shouldn't be. Some course designers do try to promote specific political agendas, but that is a risk that runs across all subjects and disciplines, and mechanisms for removing or making explicit political bias should already be in place.
6. No one here is trained to do it.	TRUE This is the number one barrier to integrating sustainability into anything. Sustainability literacy for teachers and trainers is notable by the shortness of its supply, or by its quality. What does exist is often long on content and short on straightforward intellectual and practical tools that give teachers the confidence to change or design different courses to deliver sustainability literacy.
7. Pupils and students are not interested.	NOT TRUE There is plenty of evidence that young people do care. ^{viii} And although people may hold different viewpoints on sustainability and talk about it using different words, what they feel and say is largely in agreement with the need to develop a more sustainable way of life. ^{ix x}

How do we implement sustainability literacy for all?

Sustainability literacy has been part of the citizenship component of the national school curriculum for four years, but implementation remains patchy. Some of the reasons for this are given in the table above, with a response. But the most important reason why it has proved so difficult to integrate sustainability literacy into the curriculum is that people do not have the capacity or confidence to do it. So while there are a few excellent

examples of sustainability literacy being delivered, the inspiration and the support that turns exceptional practice into normal practice is missing.

There is an opportunity here to ensure that learners experience a consistent and coherent journey through publicly funded education, with sustainability literacy embedded.

The challenge is how to do that: success will require strong leadership, not least because there is a lot of curriculum material

and learning packages around, not all of good quality. This can distract from the point that it is not the content that matters so much as equipping the learner with transferable intellectual and practical tools that they can apply themselves in a wide range of circumstances.

The process of integrating sustainability literacy into a course follows the steps of good practice for the design or review of any course; it starts with asking how the knowledge and skills will serve the learner in the future. If the learner and (ideally) past students are included in the course design process, and a framework to enable the right sustainability questions to be posed is added, then the outcome should be a course that will add positively to the sustainability literacy of the learner. For many courses relevant content is already there, but either not identified as relevant, or disconnected from elements of other courses. Volumes of extra content should not be necessary. The ability to think in a sustainability-literate way is a transferable life skill, not a separate subject.

Notes

- i King, D. A, *Climate change in science: adapt, mitigate or ignore?* Science, volume 303, 9 January 2004
- ii Townsend, M, *The poisonous cocktail in a minister's bloodstream*, The Observer, 24 October 2004, and Canada health department, *Health effects of air pollution*, 2003
- iii Coughlan, A, *Pollution triggers in a wild, wild world*, New Scientist, 3 September 2004
- iv *Millennium development goals: a compact among nations to end human poverty*, UNDP, UN human development report, 2003, which can be found at www.undp.org/hdr2003/
- v www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/taking-it-on/
- vi *Sustainable development action plan for education and skills*, DfES, 2003, see www.dfes.gov.uk/sd/
- vii *Learning and skills for sustainable development: developing a sustainability literate society*, HEPS, Forum for the Future, 2004
- viii Hicks, D, *A Lesson for the future: young people's hopes and fears for tomorrow*, Futures, volume 28, 1, pages 1–13 and MORI polls various, 2002 and 2004
- ix Report on sustain-IT workshops, Forum for the Future, August 2001
- x *Developing a language for sustainable development: catalysing the evolution of language*, UK round table on sustainable development report prepared by Quadrangle Consulting Ltd, November 1999

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