

Other Perspectives on Learning for Sustainability

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I am fortunate that the conference organisers have given me such a flexible title as **Other Perspectives on Learning for Sustainability**. It means I can almost talk about whatever I like and come in relevant to the title. A rare privilege that...

The conference has four themes. 'Celebrate, Reflect, Connect and Shape'. This paper focuses on the 'Reflect and Shape' themes, not so much the other two, although it does talk a little about the need to 'Connect' and our somewhat limited attempts to do so.

I urge you to reflect and to shape with me for 15 minutes or so. You won't necessarily agree with my 'shape' or every one of my 'reflections'. In some ways if you do then we have all missed the point of learning for sustainability [LfS], because LfS is about reflecting and defining together and reveling in our different perspectives.

For the purposes of this paper then, I am going to define 'other' in a number of ways in this paper.

- 'Other' in terms of conceptual approach [for example, LfS "other" than environmental education].
- 'Other' in terms of jurisdictional approach [for example, "LfS in jurisdictions other than Victoria"].
- 'Other' in terms of sectors and their approach to LfS [for example, "how are various other sectors are dealing with LfS?"].

The First 'Other' as a Conceptual Approach

It is perhaps contradictory in some people's minds that I stand here as the President of the Australian Association for **Environmental Education [AAEE]** talking with you about Learning for Sustainability. I guess in some ways the dichotomy between the labels is indicative of something of a problem. Those of us who have been involved in this thing called environmental education have some understanding of what it is about. It has come to mean:

- education the process of increasing knowledge, improving skills and/or exploring values
- education in, for and about the environment

It has developed over time to focus on 'brown environmental issues', such as education about waste management, water and air pollution etc and 'green environmental issues', such as education about biodiversity, water consumption etc.

Critics of EE say that it is too siloed in approach; it focuses extensively on knowledge, is too didactic and does not prompt behaviour change sufficiently. Others would say it targets the wrong people, with its major focus in schools and it does not link well with

other environmental management tools like regulation and enforcement, or financial incentives and disincentives. It is too soft and fluffy and finds it difficult to prove its impact.

“...and those critics would be wrong most of the time: they fail to do as de Bono suggests – ‘to recognize that it’s not just the car, it’s also how you drive it!’ What is touted now in some areas as new is not new at all. The principles gathered together under the name of ‘education for sustainability’ have a history, a rich history of change and struggle education: in peace, health, feminism, liberation, community development, civil rights...that is, those fields of work with real people in real systems. The best principles we promote and apply now also come out of good environmental education practice!” (Phil Smith ‘Cows are Home’).

It may be that there is more convergence than we think.

Perhaps in part though as a response to these criticisms of EE, LfS has come burning from left field: to shake us out of our certainty somewhat. The Bruntland Report in 1987 was a key focus for an already existing conceptual process that put Ecologically Sustainable Development [ESD] in front of us and presented us with a challenge. While this paper is not a history lesson, the movement towards sustainability as a concept and LfS as a vehicle was amplified at Rio, and through the Kyoto Protocol shambles from 1997 onwards, and it gained further momentum in Johannesburg in 2002. The gradual shift backwards and forwards between Ecological Sustainable Development as a label, to this thing called Sustainability has confused the process a little, especially for those of us in education, Are we talking about LfS or Education for Sustainable Development or Sustainability education? Or are we talking about just a 2006 version of Environmental Education.

And does it matter?

Yes it does, if only because confusion reigns and we need to bring everyone along together. In my view, learning for sustainability is a more satisfactory description than any of the others of our challenge and intent for this millennium and should be adopted as the label for now and the future. But this does present some challenges.

As Mr. Chris Davis, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Water Association recently told the Sustainable Cities inquiry “sustainability is a journey not a destination.”

I agree with Chris. We humans cannot live on the planet without some ecological impact and so sustainability cannot be an end point. If sustainability is a journey, then learning for sustainability is a form of transport. A form of transport that some people use some of the time to take them somewhere on that journey, towards more sustainable behaviour. Perhaps LfS is a bit like a bike for most of us; it sits in the garage and gets used occasionally to replace the car. But others hardly use it at all; preferring their four wheel drive to get them around. Now I ask you, is that sustainable?

To digress a moment I guess there are other forms of transport towards sustainability that are worthy of mention:

- There's the bulldozer of regulation, law and public policy. Fine if you are caught in its path but so few are.
- There's the stretch limo/hire car form of transport that only promotes sustainable behaviour by buying it
- There's toll road operators who can count the problem in a variety of ways but do so little to solve it

Perhaps a combination of all approaches might be analogous to a good public transport network. Perhaps there are different drivers for different people in different situations.

But I digress! The important issue here is the that LfS contributes significantly to sustainability as an outcome and so therefore points the way forward for us, notwithstanding all of the challenges that this brings both conceptually and practically.

The Second 'Other' as in a Jurisdictional Approach

I have a sneaking suspicion that the conference organisers really wanted a paper with this 'other' as the focus. They wanted me to take a look from a heightened perch at what is happening in other places about learning for sustainability.

But this section is not a detailed Cooks Tour of what other jurisdictions are doing. I would find that difficult to do and if I were in your seat it would be somewhat irrelevant, unless I was in the business of developing policy for LfS and needed to look at lots of policy options. While that might be the reality for some of you, I presume it is not everyone's business.

So I just want to draw attention to what others outside of Victoria are doing by way of drawing some key conclusions from these.

1. By way of context sustainability is conceptually at odds with our market economy and growth focus. Therefore many governments have difficulties in balancing growth and sustainability. Perhaps this is why we are somewhat shy in our focus on sustainability and still overly focused on the old silos of waste and water and energy etc.
2. *Internationally*, many countries are deliberating about sustainability issues in a way that is similar to the challenges we are facing in Australia. Time does not permit an overview of the international approaches but some interesting and far-sighted work is occurring in many OECD countries, especially in Sweden. The House of Representatives Sustainability Charter Discussion Paper provides some useful insights into their approach
3. Most *State and Territory* jurisdictions in Australia and the Commonwealth lack public policy about sustainability in which to place Learning for Sustainability. It seems that Learning for Sustainability has by default, become the driver for

sustainability rather than a tool for pushing it further. For example nationally, way back in 2000 the first National Action Plan *Environmental education for a Sustainable Future*, first linked EE and sustainability. In NSW the *Government's Learning for Sustainability Plan 2002 -2005* took this a step further. Neither jurisdiction had 'Sustainability' policy but they did have approaches to LfS. It should be noted however that at the national level the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage is undertaking a new inquiry into a *Sustainability Charter* and has recently released a discussion paper on the issue of sustainability.

4. *Western Australia* is the exception whereby their first step in approaching sustainability has been to create a framework for thinking and decision-making. The strategy proposes a set of sustainability principles that guide how government, industry and communities think about and approach the management of resources. These principles are aimed at facilitating change that has net social, environmental and economic benefit for current and future generations. Sustainability principles will underpin the State Strategic Planning Framework for the public sector and other government policies such as the Regional Policy Statement. The WA sustainability framework consists of:
 - seven foundation principles and four process principles that reflect the core values of sustainability.
 - six visions for Western Australia's sustainability
 - six goals for government and forty-two priority areas for action

The seven foundation principles are:

- decision-making processes should effectively integrate both long and short-term economic, environmental, social and equity considerations
 - where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation
 - the global dimension of environmental impacts of actions and policies should be recognised and considered
 - the need to develop a strong, growing and diversified economy which can enhance the capacity for environmental protection should be recognized.
 - the need to maintain and enhance international competitiveness in an environmentally sound manner should be recognized
 - cost-effective and flexible policy instruments should be adopted, such as improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms decisions and actions should provide for broad community involvement on issues which affect them.
5. *Local Government* however has embraced sustainability more completely than many of their state government counterparts. From the time of Rio onwards many councils have established Agenda 21 committees etc. In some jurisdictions councils [e.g. NSW] were forced to incorporate ESD into their management plans

and programs. There are some clear examples of good sustainability practice in local government, although it must be said that in the vast majority of the over 600 councils in Australia, sustainability remains a word to be included in a plan and not a driving force for change. And Learning for Sustainability still tends to be very underutilized by local government, despite its increasing profile in some councils. Two brief council case studies are cited by way of example of good practice:

- Noosa Shire Council [Sunshine Coast, Qld]: Noosa is one only two Councils in Australia that have established a ‘population cap’ in association with other significant policies and protocols – for example height restrictions on development and restrictions on outdoor advertising. These are all oriented towards sustainability. The level of community support and participation in Council policies is an important component of council’s sustainability practice.
 - Sutherland Shire Council [South Eastern Sydney, NSW]: Sutherland organises its whole Council Management Plan and reporting processes under sustainability principles. This enables Council to undertake its entire program to meet linked economic, environmental and social outcomes to the benefit of the Sutherland community. It is of note that there is strong community advocacy about sustainability in Sutherland and the work of the Sutherland Shire Environment Centre – one of the only community-funded, shop front environment centers in NSW – has been significant in this process.
6. *The personal*: While not strictly a ‘jurisdiction’ in the same way as the others, discussed above, all change (structural, system, cultural, organisational, economic, environmental) has people at its core; and each of us is and can be responsible for our own jurisdictions. The choices and actions we make and take on a daily basis at home, at work and in our recreation time will have significant impact on systems in which we operate.

The Third ‘Other’: Various Sector Approaches to LfS

LfS is complex and sophisticated; it is not just a process of ‘telling them and they will do it’ but it uses action research, partnership, mentoring and other interactive processes to promote sustainable behaviour. LfS is not as simple as ‘just a brochure’. The educational process and it’s proximity with the culture of the particular sector [community of interest] is the key to a successful LfS program.

In a way the following ancient Chinese proverb best describes the LfS approach to me.

Tell me... I forget, show me....I remember, involve me... I understand

The recent ARIES Review of *Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability* gives an in-depth overview of how LfS is integrated within a range of

sectors. The brief sector specific commentary below, outlines the approach that is used within various sectors. This is designed to illustrate the diversity of 'others' that need to exist and that work progresses at a substantially different pace within different sectors.

Schools and their Systems

One sector where there has been significant movement towards LfS is within the school sector.

Following significant Sustainable Schools programs in both Victoria and NSW in late 2005 the Australian Government released *Educating for a Sustainable Future – a National Environmental Education Statement for Australian Schools (NEES.)* The NEES is endorsed by all Australian, State and Territory Government Ministers for Education. It represents the first ever nationally agreed description of the nature and purpose of environmental education for sustainability for all years of schooling and is an important Australian initiative to support the United Nations *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005-2014.*

Growing within the context of the NEES, the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) involves a whole school [and a whole school system] approach to sustainability. It aims at fostering school ownership and empowerment of the sustainability program, focusing on student involvement and learning. The program implements improvement in a school's management of resources and grounds (including energy, waste, water, biodiversity, landscape design, products and materials) and integrates this approach into the existing curriculum and daily running of the school.

The AuSSI is now being rolled out across all States and Territories. The motivated involvement of all education systems in each jurisdiction is crucial to this approach. It is clear though that in this sector national [and State and Territory] leadership is evident and vital to its success. In part this is possible because systems exist which can be influenced to take on the issue and provide leadership.

Working effectively in schools is the focus of many of the concurrent presentations across the remainder of the conference and so I won't talk more about schools at this stage.

Early Childhood

The introduction of LfS into the early childhood sector provides an interesting alternative case study. I am indebted to Sue Elliot the Convenor of the AAEE Early Childhood Special Interest Group for this material.

In this sector the approach is much more piecemeal and the AAEE SIG is currently making strong representation to the relevant authorities to coordinate it and extend it to a more complete and strategic approach. There has been significant work to date, with key elements of the approach occurring across a number of jurisdictions. For example:

- The 'Patches of Green' report commissioned by the NSW EPA in 2000 and published in 2003 sought to review literature and practices in early childhood

environmental education. The title of the report arose from the patchwork quilt of green environmental education patches evident in the wider Australian early childhood sector. The green patches were identified as “exemplary organisations, individuals and centres that share a passion and commitment to the importance of early childhood environmental education” (NSW EPA, 2003, p 1).

- An increasing number of and commitment to maintaining green patches is now evident. The ‘Patches of Green’ originally identified are still a driving force, but there is now a framework emerging to support and strengthen the patchwork quilt at local, state and national levels.
- At the state level there are now three early childhood environmental education professional interest groups, EEEEC and QECEEN, NSW Early Childhood Environmental Education Network (NSW ECEEN) established in 2004. In particular, the NSW ECEEN and EEEEC groups now have a part-time employed staff member to administer the group and the EEEEC group has established a resource centre with assistance from the City of Darebin in Melbourne.
- In Victoria, the Department of Human Services, which has responsibility for early childhood services, has published a Design Guide for Children’s Services (2005) inclusive of sustainable design principles.
- The NSW EPA has funded a professional development program 'Promoting Environmental Sustainability in Early Childhood Services' across the early childhood sector in NSW during 2004-5.
- The NSW Total Environment Centre while not directly associated with the early childhood sector has produced several publications useful in promoting safer and sustainable practices with respect to chemicals and children.

The goal is for early childhood LfS to be mainstream not marginal. The early childhood sector however, still lacks a supportive coordinating framework to promote swift and systemic still change across the sector. This case study is included to demonstrate increasing movement within a sector towards a more holistic implementation of LfS. This is a long and challenging process but one which will eventually result in a sector acceptance of LfS.

Community Education for Adults

Most would agree that the delivery of LfS has been piecemeal into the broader Australian adult community. There are a range of education programs occurring and these are delivered by state and local government, industry and non-government organisations. Many of these programs are effective and have a high profile locally. Often though, they are directed only at a single issue, for example recycling, and they do not have sustainability focus; they do not promote integrated sustainable behaviour. In this sense they cannot be regarded as LfS programs at all. These programs are often knowledge oriented, information rich and often do not focus strongly enough on attitudes or use processes that really impact on people’s behaviour.

The challenge for achieving a comprehensive approach to the delivery of LfS into the community is two fold. Firstly it is about resources and capacity. Who is our 'community' and how are we working with them to achieve more sustainable behaviour? Do we have sufficient resources to make our intentions a reality? Second, it is about our competence to take on this task. The absence of any agreed and supported national standards for community LfS is a major issue and a real challenge for the future.

The slowness of the Australian take-up of the opportunities presented by the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development have not assisted comprehensive implementation of LfS into the community. It is clear that there is much more to be done before we can claim that LfS is fully integrated within the community education sector.

Conclusion

As indicated in the early childhood case study, above, the goal for LfS is to be mainstream not marginal. Mainstream within a community that rates sustainability as an essential public policy goal; mainstream across a number of important sectors within the community; mainstream so that programs promoting sustainable behaviour are provided across national, local and state governments, industry and the community sector.

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