

Reflections on Sustainability: Questioning the Knowing and the Doing

Abstract

There can be little doubt that sustainability is the environmental buzz word of the early twenty first century; a buzz word for politicians, bureaucrats and academics certainly. From the time of the Rio Summit in the early 1990s people have been wrestling with the concept of sustainability in its ecological sense, and increasingly from an integrated triple bottom line perspective.

During that time there has been much written and spoken about sustainability and what it means. Academic writing, legislation, bureaucratic structures and education and other programs have better reflected an understanding that if humans across the planet don't act more sustainably, then our planet will not be able to sustain the lifestyle we aspire to. Given the ways in which the western world gobbles up resources, there is a significantly increased responsibility to drive more sustainable behaviour on those of us in developed societies.

But how is the concept of sustainability translated into the community psyche and community norms, and what is the difference between the knowing and the doing? We can continually reflect, argue and urge without achieving one iota of behavioural shift towards more sustainable practice. We can spark the relatively easy lifestyle changes, for example kerbside recycling in metropolitan areas, but can we reduce our reliance on air conditioners or motor vehicles? We can see people walking their dogs carrying a plastic bag of collected faeces but what is happening about responsible products and packaging choices at the supermarket?

This paper reflects on the questions and challenges that face our community about the real changes required to behave in a more sustainable manner. It focuses on the doing rather than the knowing and provides guidance on the use of education to change behaviour and to raise awareness about sustainability.

About the Author

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Introduction

The decade 2005 to 2014 has been declared by the United Nations General Assembly as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. This recognises that education is crucial to growing the understanding of the global community about sustainability. While this is a commendable and far reaching decision it exposes a significant reality that is basic to the thinking behind this paper. That is, that we have a long way to go before our reasonably sophisticated

Australian community has a real grasp of sustainability as an issue and will be prepared to make the tough lifestyle choices that living more sustainably demands. It could be argued that at a global level we have even further to go.

In his opening remarks at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg September 2002, the Director General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, said that “sustainable development requires knowledgeable, active citizens and caring informed decision makers, new forms of community and corporate behaviour... it requires deeper ways of thinking than we are used to”. This is a realistic view of the challenge that confronts us globally, especially in developed communities, with our focus on economic growth, our reliance on technology to solve our problems and the fact that we use over 80% of the world’s resources.

A real challenge exists: growth, economic prosperity, consumption and lifestyle verses a sustainable future. In the game for life the underdog status of the latter is clearly obvious. At a national level it is obvious that we are failing in our responsibilities to the planet. The Australian Government’s failure to sign up to Kyoto, our reliance on export earnings from the sale of non-replaceable resources and the “discovery” of environment as an issue only in the period three or four months before an election are examples of the lip service we pay to sustainability. Around the corner in my street it is obvious as well; obvious because of the size of the new houses that are being built and because of a reliance on cars instead of public transport; obvious also by the absence of compost bins and the number of home air conditioners.

The changes demanded by the current water crisis notwithstanding, there is a long way that we have to go as a community to achieve a more sustainable lifestyle. There are so many more tough decisions to make and behaviours and practices to change before we start to have an impact on the challenge. Our first step though, is to translate sustainability into something that the Australian community can grasp, understand and respond to.

What is Sustainability?

It is not for the want of trying that we have not been able to clearly define sustainability so that the community can fully appreciate its meaning. Academics and government have agonised for a number of years about what sustainability is. They have written extensively about ecological sustainable development and its relationship with the concept of sustainability. Policy and definitions of sustainability abound, but these may do more to confuse the issue than to clarify it. Perhaps this plethora of writing, defining, and redefining is in a way indicative of the problem. Instead of getting on and communicating with people about real changes for sustainability now, we get caught up in trying to clarify what it means. In this sense sustainability becomes an intellectual [or knowing] issue, rather than a doing one.

Perhaps it has been over-defined and that is a part of the problem. Certainly Professor Ronnie Harding in her paper at the Sydney conference on Sustainability Education in 2003 made the point that it was. She indicated that in Australia we need to “recognize unsustainable activities and act to change them, rather than arguing about what constitutes sustainability”.

Despite the good sense in Professor Harding’s perspective this author still feels the need to define sustainability before we go much further; funny that! This paper uses the definition contained within the NSW Government’s Environmental Education Plan *Learning for Sustainability*.

Sustainability is the goal to be achieved through ecologically sustainable development. It refers to the ability to continue and enhance an activity into the future or maintain a state or condition undiminished [or enhanced] over time. Sustainability involves integrated ecological, personal and social [including economic] goals and implies changes in practices by individuals and organisations.

Ecologically sustainable development [ESD] is development which meets the needs of Australians today, while conserving our ecosystems for the benefit of future generations of all species. This is the path or framework for achieving sustainability.

A/Professor Harding acknowledges that sustainability is a contested concept which is struggling to accommodate:

What do we need to achieve [science based questions]?

What do we want to achieve [values based interpretations]?

What is it possible to achieve [politically and socially practical actions]?

In her writing about the process of developing more sustainable behaviour, A/Prof Daniella Tilbury has flagged four pillars of education for sustainability. She argues that all learning for sustainability must involve:

Participation and action

Relevance

Critical reflection

Dialogue and listening.

To the lay Australian however, these definitions and constructs mean little. It has proved very difficult to communicate the complex issues surrounding ESD and sustainability by just promulgating and discussing the definition. Many people just won't understand it and don't want to engage in it, especially when the issue threatens lifestyle choices and personal freedoms. While the knowing should frame the activity of policy makers and program deliverers in trying to spark more sustainable community behaviour, it is not a message in and of itself. Experience in NSW gained through the development, delivery and evaluation of the *Our Environment – It's a Living Thing* program demonstrates that people are just not turned on by the term sustainability, no matter how often and how well it is defined.

What about the trends and contexts towards sustainability? What does the community think and do?

Australia is a consumer-based market-driven community. People are generally unwilling to forego lifestyle choices which they believe they have worked hard to achieve. Efforts to enhance sustainable practice must walk the fine line between being seen as ultra-green in their conceptual basis by some people and being realistic and practical enough to make an impact on people's actions. Programs cannot be seen to be limiting lifestyle. Smarter not worse is the necessary catch cry.

The *Who Cares about the Environment in 2003* study indicates that people in NSW have "more sophisticated environmental knowledge" than was identified in previous surveys in 1994, 1997 and 2000. They value the environment as a part of their lives and support compulsory

environmental regulation. This heightened level of concern and sophistication however, has led only to limited changes in behaviours that impact on sustainability. Only 8% of people indicate that they are doing a great deal to improve the environment and the bulk of people assess themselves [43%] as “doing at least some things” only. When viewed alongside the data about what people are doing, reducing water consumption [65%], re-using a product [62%], composting [47%], purchasing an energy efficient appliance [48%] the situation can be seen as somewhat bleak. Because if only 8% of people do all of these things regularly the sustainability effect is, in reality, quite low.

A review of the national report *Are We Sustaining Australia?* indicates that in 2001 while we are enhancing aspects of individual and community well being, we are not progressing well in providing for intergenerational equity or protecting biodiversity and maintaining the essential ecological process and life-support systems. The report states that “none of these can be achieved unless the ecological processes on which life depends are protected and unless the natural resources on which economic and community well-being depend are managed sustainably”.

In research conducted by Woolcott Research a number of one-on-one, in-depth interviews were held. The term sustainability was quite unfamiliar to people, except to those who were most environmentally aware. When prompted, people could ascribe meaning by linking it to what they knew: that sustainability related to nurture/feed/keep alive. Some people related the word to a breakfast cereal; “Kellogg’s Sustain”. People are more familiar with the term when it is linked to other concepts, for example; Sustainable energy and sustainable farming, sustaining a way of life/lifestyle. For others sustainability is also about maintenance of the status quo, not about reduction.

In considering this research, McLoughlin argues that the word ‘sustainability’ is often narrowly interpreted. “However, if we are to genuinely work towards a sustainable future, it is critical that the community develops a broader understanding of the goals of sustainability, as well as the motivation and appropriate capacity, so that they can and will participate in trying to achieve those goals” (in Palmer & Birch, 2003, page 447). Further, she concludes that “recognition in the community of the term ‘sustainability’ is low but growing, with increased use of the term in a variety of contexts”.

Carroll argues that “the key concept of *sustainability* [needs to] be more explicitly operationalised within” education programs. There is a need clarify in a rational/intellectual sense what the concept of sustainability actually means, especially when targeting segments other than “real greens and green posers”. This should occur in language that is approachable and accessible. He proposes that the word sustainability can be used in communication but should not be the focus of any message. This approach should concentrate on growing a connection with the concept of sustainability. It should also make more transparent, public and logical that the way in which sustainable actions are increased depends on the internal locus of control of the individual.

To summarise the current situation, while there is support for sustainability, the majority of the NSW community at least, see the environment as an issue of concern for the future (10 years time) rather than now [*Who Cares About the Environment 2004*]. How many ten-year periods can we afford to wait before sustainable behaviour is a community norm?

In order for people to become more likely to change behaviour toward more sustainable living practices, they must be shown, in a personally relevant way, why it is important that these changes take place now. This must be done without over-emphasising negative consequences of unsustainable environmental practice because there is no evidence that fear-based messages will work. As Carroll indicates “the challenge is to generate a strong sense of personal identification with the need to adopt more sustainable living practices now and to demonstrate how those practices will make a real, positive difference”.

To achieve more sustainable behaviour now, what do we have to do?

The World Summit in Johannesburg and the creation of the national decade put the challenge improving sustainable behaviour clearly in the hands of the educators. The tenor of conversation at the IUCN CEC workshop on Education for Sustainable Development at the Johannesburg Summit [personal communication Australian Association of Environmental Education, Daniella Tilbury] was that:

Educators have not done a good job of communicating the value of the process learning... about sustainability.

Most educators see education for sustainability as a way to provide information about sustainable development rather than a learning path where people can make personal decisions for action. It is a “knowing rather than a doing”.

The challenge is to facilitate social change [leading to more sustainable behaviour by magnifying the impact of many existing small projects either by replication or scaling them up to a larger size]. This would emphasise a “doing rather than a knowing”.

Harding [*Educating for Sustainability 2003*] goes further by stating that “many of our education programs seem to be aimed at no more than fiddling around the edges – orders of magnitude away from the reality of the challenge at hand”.

McLoughlin (*Is sustainability a breakfast cereal?*) argues that “to genuinely participate in working towards a sustainable future people need:

- To have a conceptual framework for understanding and action, hence the value of the overarching and interconnected nature of ‘sustainability’,
- To develop an understanding of their place in the larger picture,
- To be prepared and able to adopt sustainable behaviour”.

These are desirable objectives but, as indicated above, if we get too caught up in achieving the first one, it may be at the expense of immediate gains in achieving the last. Therefore, in order to impact on sustainable practice across Australia, what do the educators have to do?

Take on the challenge seriously. We have to see increased sustainability in our communities and workplaces as our challenge. Until we translate the concept in a way that people, across Australia in all walks of life, can engage with it and willingly translate it into their everyday household behaviour and work practice, then we are not taking the challenge seriously.

Promote the doing not the knowing. The education programs and activities that we deliver need to emphasise the things that people can do [must do] to behave more sustainably. If this can also improve their knowledge about what sustainability is and encourage acceptable lifestyle choices

then this is a bonus, especially for the future when choices get harder and have more lifestyle impact.

See growth in sustainable behaviour as a journey. It is not possible to move from unsustainable practice to sustainable practice in a single step [it may not even be possible in a multitude of steps]. It is important that educators see the journey and encourage continual movement through it. The challenge in this is that each individual begins the journey differently: for some it's in school; for others the journey begins at home in early childhood; for other people it is well into adulthood. The educator needs to assess and discuss the beginning of the journey with those in the target audience for the program.

If the knowing is important raise it in a way that extends the doing. Regardless of the target of specific programs educators need to raise concepts that facilitate people's engagement in discussion about sustainability and that stimulate action. Communicate the foundation ideas in a way that connects concepts and builds on what people already know about the environment and positive behaviour. *For example: mulching is a great way of reducing water use in your garden. This is how you mulch....When can you start?*

Integrate a sustainability theme into all education efforts. Regardless of the specific environmental theme of your project it is important to raise the issue of sustainability as often as possible. For example: even when educating people about waste disposal, messages about sustainability can be incorporated. *If you compost your food waste rather than putting it in the bin you'll be returning nutrients to the soil at your place and helping the planet.*

Promote connection to place messages. In general people are connected to their own place [where they live and work]. Sustainability messages with a close connection to place are important drivers of change.

Promote changed practices in all aspects of life. Growing improved behaviour at home and translating home behaviours to work and play is a key challenge. Growing internal locus of control at home, work and at play so that positive behaviours become the norm is important for the success of the program. In terms of actual behaviour change it would seem that more has occurred in people's home lives and therefore, there is more room to grow change in the work and play situations. But the messages and the ways in which they need to be carried into to people at work and at play are more specific, complex and difficult. For example, is mass media the most appropriate means to promote work-related behavioural change or should more direct methods be used [e.g. Vocational Education and Training, industry educational packages, direct mail etc]? Certainly programs to date in the environment and other sectors have included both social marketing and more direct education methods. The NSW WorkCover program on OH&S issues at work is an excellent example of the use of the mass media to impact on workplace behaviour.

Target everyone equally? Carroll argues that "broad audience segmentation needs to be applied in developing social marketing strategies and communication materials leading to enhanced sustainability". A concern with efforts to date is that NSW programs have tried to target equally all NSW residents above the age of 18. The primary target for mainstream, mass mediated communication should be the "mid to light green groups" [Carroll]. There is most potential

within these groups to increase knowledge and impact on attitudes and behaviours. These are the groups most ready to change towards more sustainable behaviour.

Promote education for sustainability within the context of lifelong learning. Across Australia there is a growth in appreciation that learning is a lifelong process. This is demonstrated in part by the increase in mature aged students at universities, in vocational education and training and in adult and community education programs. As discussed above, learning about sustainability is also a lifelong process aimed at behaviour change and it fits well into broader lifelong learning goals and activities of many Australians. Educators are well placed to integrate sustainability into lifelong learning processes and approaches.

Focus on work, home and play. Sustainable behaviour does not only happen between 6pm and 7am and on the weekend. Education efforts need to focus on work practice as well as those occurring at home or during recreation. To do this specific education programs should be conducted with industry and recreational/sporting groups

Promote key drivers. In assessing the motivating cues and drivers surrounding environmental sustainability, it is clear that in an emotional sense the notion of “leaving our environment as good as it is now or better for future generations” taps into powerful and existing feelings. This is especially the case among parents and grandparents. Sustainability education programs must build on the notion of intergenerational equity as a key driver for present and future change.

Promote internal locus of control. To date, in our education efforts in Australia the promotion of an internal locus of control about sustainability has been centred within messages that somewhat indirectly raise the concept of sustainability; for example in NSW the *Our Environment – It’s a Living Thing* program. The aspiration of this program has been that people will take the sustainability message from the brand [initially through its mass media execution] and grow their internal locus of control about sustainable behaviour across all aspects of their lives [work, home and play]. Perhaps this is overly sophisticated and more direct methods of driving home the sustainability message to promote an individual’s locus of control at work and home, are required.

But is it all our problem?

Of course it is not. At the national level it is crucial that the Commonwealth Government shows more leadership by developing a national sustainability approach and framework. We lack a national strategic approach to sustainability, although there is lots of talk and a range of on-the-ground “projects”, little integrated action occurs. What we all need is a strategic approach designed to really drive sustainable behaviour forward. The lack of national interest in extending NSW programs like *Our Environment – It’s a Living Thing* is a clear example of the failure to deal with this issue in a progressive way.

The lack of a real national strategy about sustainability bears contrast with our national efforts to respond to HIV/AIDS. Here, we are currently involved in developing our fifth national strategy [since 1988] and activity is planned and supported through all tiers of government, the community and the medical profession. This is a supported strategic partnership which has showed hugely positive results.

At the state and local levels support for education programs aimed at sustainability waxes and wains. In some jurisdictions, particularly at the local level, there are significant programs in place to carry forward the messages of more sustainable practice, in others lip service is paid to the issue and activity still focuses on the end of pipe environmental problems, for example waste disposal. A much more concerted and integrated effort is required if education is to contribute to the desired outcome of a more sustainable planet for the future.

Conclusion

A sustainable future is vital for us all. It is even more vital for the well-being of future generations, for our children and their children. Instead of putting all of our efforts into its definition and the knowing let's get on and do the doing in amore integrated and considered manner.

While not providing all of the impetus for change, education of the Australian community is vital in bringing about more sustainable behaviour. Education that focuses on targeting people effectively and promoting internal locus of control so that individuals can identify unsustainable behaviour and modify it; education that sits squarely within lifelong learning approaches and programs and promotes a journey towards more sustainable behaviour; education that acknowledges the challenges of growing people's understanding about the concept of sustainability but promotes and demonstrates the necessary behaviour shifts as its major goal.

Achieving more sustainable behaviour is the challenge of the present and the future for us all; individually in our homes and in our workplaces; and professionally in our efforts to encourage others to behave more sustainably. As educators we have a significant responsibility to address this challenge head on.

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