Sustainable Development, Policy and Learning: exploring relationships

A talk by William Scott [1] at the *Council for Environmental Education* Policy Forum on 18 November 2003: *Learning the Sustainability lesson: the government's response*

I'm going to talk about various ways of viewing the environmental and social problems we face, how policy on sustainable development relates to these, and our options for learning. I shall argue that both policy makers and educators need to do more to acknowledge both the complexity of these issues, and their inherent uncertainties.

Stephen Sterling is apt to quote Einstein who said:

> No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We have to learn to see the world anew.

Stephen Sterling likes this quote because it helps make his point about our need to find an entirely new way of thinking about how we live in the world if we're going to resolve the dilemmas we face. For him, this revolves around systems thinking and the adoption of what he calls a postmodern ecological worldview. There is undoubtedly something in this argument – and in the Einstein quote.

Of course, Einstein didn't think much of uncertainty; he famously said that God doesn't play dice with the universe, whereas we now know that this is just what does happen, and there is a great deal of certainty in what people and organisations: NGOs, agencies, think-tanks, environmental activists, and interested academics, argue and advocate as they compete with each other to see whose ideas – whose certainties – will best save humanity and the planet. I want to argue that acknowledging uncertainty, and fostering open, enquiring minds are what we need to do. I want to argue that we won't get very far until we understand that learning as a process is integral to sustainable development rather than being something that can be used, instrumentally, to bring sustainable development about.

As this is an unusual and quite atypical gathering, in that speakers and audience, like to think they understand something of the issues, two questions come to mind:

1. Does anyone here think that the current policies of the United States government in relation to sustainable development will lead to a sustainable world?

2. Who thinks that the current sustainable development policies of the UK government will lead to a sustainable world?

Answers [2] to such questions will depend on how you read the policy, and interpret the problem. If you say 'yes', it suggests that you see enough of a congruency between the policy and the problem to think that one has a chance of successfully addressing the other. And only if you say 'yes', does it becomes worth asking what role learning has in achieving policy goals. Any role for learning will depend on whether the problem is seen as mainly environmental in nature, and fixable through technological change, or whether it is seen as essentially social, and only resolvable through social change: More about this later.

Bur first, I want now to examine a range of perspectives on both the problems we face, and associated policy dispositions. I think there is quite a spectrum, as Table 1 shows. Let me start with an extreme. My colleague Ingolfur Blüdhorn argues that the problem is intractable, sustainable development is impossible, and that policy-makers know this, but are jollying us along with bread and circuses in order to keep us happy. In other words, there's nothing to do except, perhaps, to learn to accept the inevitable with good grace.

At the other extreme, there are those who think that the whole business is exaggerated, and that green policies are actually damaging the real interests of people and economies. From this perspective, there tends to be substantial trust in markets and technology to solve problems. The role for learning here is to promote autonomy and personal responsibility.

I think that there are two other broad groupings. In one we find that, although a problem is acknowledged, people variously see that evolutionary change within the present social system will be possible – through appeals or persuasion: if only we'd all learn to rethink what we do. The role for learning here is clear. It is to persuade people to do as advised by experts, aided by a stress on regulation and taxation. You know the

messages only too well: use recycled paper, pick up litter, sell your car, grow your own food, consume less, shop locally, don't fly, turns lights out, become vegan, wear thicker sweaters, don't use hosepipes, ban GMOs, keep windows closed, vote, etc. There is much confidence and certainty here. Something of this view is exemplified on the front page of Ofsted's 2003 ESD report where a child's global footprint says:

> "I would treat the world as a friend and pick up all of the litter in the school playground."

In the other broad group, we find many variants on the need for new ways of viewing the human-Earth relationship through what's sometimes called a New Environmental Paradigm. Here, people assert that there is both a serious problem, and the hope of salvation, but only if we learn to live radically differently, either spiritually or economically. In this view, we need to learn to let considerations of equity and justice dictate behaviour. Despite their many differences, all members of this group have one thing in common: they don't have a convincing explanation as to how we get from where we are now, to where they would like us to be. In other words, their theory of change is implausible. A lot of people are waiting eagerly for the overthrow of global capitalism – but not before their pensions have been paid.

There are others, like Lancaster's John Foster, who although they see the possibility of progress, argue that not only is present government policy, at best, wholly inadequate to the task, but also that, policy-makers know this, and will – or dare – not tell us. They operate, he says, in "bad faith", and the role for learning here is heavily constrained by this.

I want now to say something more about 3 different types of learning intervention which Stephen Gough [3]and I have termed: Type 1, Type 2 and Type 3. *Type 1* interventions commonly depend upon a notion of an environmentally responsible citizenry informed by scientifically-derived environmental facts. Examples of *Type 1* interventions would include the production of leaflets, adverts or other forms of publicity to inform people of scientific arguments supporting, for example, the use of energy-saving light bulbs, the addition of cavity-wall insulation to houses, recycling domestic waste to create compost, and so on. In these more or less straightforward and familiar contexts, it is often the case that a real benefit can be gained and some pressure taken from 'the environment') by the application of science and technology. This sees learning as a tool for the achievement of environmental maintenance where the 'citizen' is the vector through which objective knowledge is turned into social action. This assumes, at the very least, the following:

- that such facts are known with certainty,
- that countries are run by their citizens, and
- that the role of 'citizen' is of prime significance to people more than, say, the roles of employee, investor, parent, etc when they are making environmentally-significant choices.

However, this is a simplistic view of the relationship between people and society where, social outcomes are seen as the more-or-less straightforward expression of the wishes of a majority of independently-minded, rational and empowered individuals. And it is clear from Kollmuss and Aygeman's review in *Environmental Education Research* [4]that a clear, linear mechanism linking learning to change in a positive way remains elusive, and probably doesn't exist.

Type 2 learning interventions, on the other hand, assume that what citizens need is social-scientific insights and technology. Through these they will come to understand the social obstacles to sustainability, and thus see the need for social, political and environmental action. This model entails two rounds of learning. In the first, people's eyes are opened to social and environmental truths. In the second, they learn (with others) how to live sustainably, through collective action. This is a view particularly associated with the idea of an emancipatory curriculum and usefully brings together goals of social and environmental justice. A good Type 2 example is promoting the use of public transport instead of private cars or perhaps urging people not to make journeys at all). In such everyday cases, although some environment pressure may well be relieved, the benefit to the individual is often slight, or involve a real cost or sacrifice. However, this is ok, because learning interventions of this kind often begin from a vision of an alternative society in which things would be different for example, where the social pressure to drive would have vanished. Type 2 interventions do tend to over-specify in advance what people are supposed to do once they're emancipated.

Type 1 and *Type 2* interventions both suppose that what counts as pro-environmental, or good citizenship behaviours can be specified, and that, through learning, appropriate skills can be developed that will contribute to bringing about these behaviours. This is not questioned, and the main debate is about *which* set of skills or competencies should be the primary target for learning to bring sustainable development about.

It is, of course, clear that there will be instances in which the dissemination of factual information about environmental variables or the facilitation of collective action, will enable people to solve environmental problems to common advantage. What it's hard to accept, however, is that one or other of these approaches is always useful in addressing the problems we all face. There is a 'useful but not sufficient' feel to both these approaches given the uncertainty surrounding facts, and the complexity of social contexts.

Which brings me to Type 3 approaches. From a *Type 3* perspective, problems have multiple, contested definitions and shifting, contingent solutions where uncertainty about what best to do is the norm. Thus, the key skill has to be learning to manage, individually and collectively, how we live our lives in relation to the natural world. This involves the rigour of being clear about the following:

- When we *really* know something (we might decide to teach it)
- When we really don't (we might decide to say so and teach the parameters of the doubt involved)
- The need, sometimes, to make important choices in the absence of incontestable (natural or social) scientific guidance.

It is clear that complexity and uncertainty are facets of such a context that cannot be wished or educated away, and that change of some kind will happen whether it is planned and managed well, badly, or at all. The issue for us is to learn from change. This conceptualisation seems the only one fully consistent with Bernard Crick's call for a citizenship education which provides learners with "the means by which they reconcile or manage conflicts of interests and ideals" in the environmental context and, potentially consistent, with his further insistence that such education must "begin at the beginning, that is to build a citizenship teaching relevant to all the school population from concepts that children actually hold or that are at least familiar to them".

Finally, with such complexity and uncertainty, what are policy makers to do? What's their best line through these conflicting and competing ideas? Well, they might decide to hold competing definitions of problems at the same time. Of course, this can be difficult to explain or justify to stakeholders, who are likely, not only to expect the appearance of clarity of purpose, but also to wish to promote their own particular rationality through compatible problem-definitions. One practical instance of this is to call for people to be given perspectives other than their own, other than teachers, and other than policy-makers, and encourage critical thinking and open-ended enquiry, and recognise uncertainty and its implications.

However, it is important to be clear that although problems related to sustainable development are likely to continue to be characterised by uncertainty, it *is* possible (and important) to chip away at this. It *is* possible to know things: but it is important to be absolutely honest about when we *really* know something, and when we just wish we did.

At heart, there *is* an unknowability about much of this in that we can't be sure how something – a policy, a learning intervention, whatever – will play out because we genuinely cannot know in advance what we need to do next. Charles Lindblom argues for what he terms 'disjointed incrementalism' to describe change which is erratic, evolutionary and iterative, and which (like learning) takes place at the margins of who we already are, and what we already know, and not by simply absorbing facts, or by taking giant leaps to imagined ideal states. There seems no doubt that change, through learning, towards sustainable development will occur in this way, but that doesn't imply a need to be any more 'disjointed' than we can help.

EndNotes

[1] William Scott is Director of the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment at the University of Bath. This talk draws heavily on on-going joint work with Stephen Gough.

[2] In the event, no one at the time asserted to either of these propositions/questions. However, in discussion afterwards, it was recognised that there were aspects of each administration's policies at both national and/or local levels which were a better fit with the issues than is sometimes acknowledged.

[3] For further deliberations on these matters see Scott WAH & Gough SR (2003) *Sustainable Development and Learning: framing the issues*; London/New York: RoutledgeFalmer and
Scott WAH & Gough SR (Eds.) (2003) *Key Issues in Sustainable Development and Learning: a critical review*; London/New York: RoutledgeFalmer

[4] See Volume 8(3) of *Environmental Education Research*

Table 1 Sustainable development: The problem-policy gap, underlying rationalities and the role of learning

Problem perspectives	Policy options	Underlying rationalities	Roles for learning
A **Problem? What problem?**	1. Markets and prices (maybe with regulation and the WTO, and new technology)	Trust what works, and people; let markets enable and regulate what we do	Promote autonomy and individual responsibility
B **The problem can be addressed; it is a question of (serious) reform**	2. Encourage people's actions through information and communication campaigns	Trust role models and moral leadership	Encourage responsible (environmental) behaviour
	3. Persuade people through well-targeted taxation, laws, and regulatory frameworks	Trust bureaucracy and regulation; organise behaviour through social rules	Encourage compliance
C **Although the problem is acute, building sustainable development *will* be possible**	4. Technological innovation	Trust experts and the hierarchies of science and nature	Disseminate scientific knowledge
	5 A radical re-think of the human-Earth relationship	Trust spiritual leadership and ecological design	Learn to live in harmony with other species and each other
	6. Radical change of economic structure (eg, the overthrow of global capitalism)	Trust charismatic leaders and local participatory democracy	Learn that considerations of equity and justice should dictate how humans live
	7. Dissemble about the nature of the problem; pretend a bit of reform will do	*Trust to luck*	*Learning ends up being a displacement activity*

D **Humanity seems incapable of the change required for sustainable development**	8. *Don't admit it; jolly people along* or Be honest; let this understanding inform actions	*Fatalism / deception* Fatalism / despondency	*Learning ends up being a displacement activity* Learn to accept the inevitable: good grace and stoicism
E **Problem? Which problem?**	9. Build human capability – incrementally	A Clumsy approach (Note 3)	Learning is integral to sustainable development

Notes on Table 1

1. Table 1 builds on work that Stephen Gough and William Scott have developed in:

   Scott WAH & Gough SR (2003) *Sustainable Development and Learning: framing the issues*; London / New York: RoutledgeFalmer and

   Scott WAH & Gough SR (Eds.) (2003) *Key Issues in Sustainable Development and Learning: a critical review*; London / New York: RoutledgeFalmer

2. Albert Einstein: "No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We have to learn to see the world anew."

3. We favour a 'clumsy' approach which is one that entertains competing definitions of problems at the same time. Of course, such an approach can be difficult for policy-makers to explain or justify to their various stakeholder groups, who are likely not only to expect the appearance of clarity of purpose, but also to wish to promote their own particular rationality with its corresponding problem-definitions. However, it is important to be clear that though this view is saying that many problems related to sustainable development are likely to continue to be characterised by uncertainty, it *is* possible (and important) to chip away at this uncertainty. It *is* possible to know things: but it is important to be absolutely honest about when we *really* know something, and when we just wish we did. There is nothing in the least bit scientifically rigorous about assuming values for unknown variables and then building these into policy prescriptions behind a screen of fine words and / or abstruse mathematics.

4. The ideas in the Table have been built up in such a 'clumsy' way; typically, such ideas (and Tables) develop iteratively through thinking, discussion, and critique, and might go through 10 to 15 versions before they see the light of day. We are still working on these ideas. Of course, any such categorisation has to be a simplification as such problem perspectives are not necessarily as fully discrete, as or as uni-dimensional, as suggested here, and the point of the clumsy approach is that value and usefulness can be acknowledged in more that one of them at the same time. The important question in all of this is to what extent do they help you think about these important issues in your own contexts. Thus, the Table should be viewed heuristically as an aid to thinking about the relationship between how we perceive problems relating to sustainable development, and how we view the adequacy of policy relating to the problems – as well as thinking about underlying rationalities and the role of learning in relation to any particular policy.

5. Learning needs to be viewed broadly, for example as the outcome from formal or non-formal educational programmes in schools, further / higher education and / or communities (whether from designated environmental education, citizenship or ESD interventions, or from more mainstream activities), or from personal or incidental learning where no teacher or instructor was involved. An important issue is whether it is a question of learning about sustainable development and then applying that learning (as envisioned in Type 1 & 2 interventions), or whether it is crucially important to go beyond this instrumental perspective, and acknowledge that learning is *integral* to the process of sustainable development (Type 3) which will not be taking place unless learning occurs.