

ESD: what sort of Decade? What sort of Learning?

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Summary

There now seems to be widespread agreement that ESD is an important and timely educational policy response if we are to be able to face up to the social and environmental challenges that lie ahead. But there appears to be much less agreement as to how ESD might be implemented, or about the nature of the learning that will be required. This talk explores how ESD is interpreted across formal-sector and community-based institutions, and highlight inconsistencies and contradictions in this. It sets out suggestions for priority actions by government and interested stakeholders, if vision and leadership is to be provided for the Decade, and end with a call for all those institutions involved in ESD to make a reality of the idea of the 'learning organisation'.

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I'm grateful to Unesco for the opportunity to speak today, and pleased to be able to contribute to the launch of the Decade. This is a significant event for all those interested in education – learning – and sustainable development – and their inter-relationship – a relationship which is in need of greater conceptual clarity than it currently has. I hope that what I say today will help this.

I'd like to begin with a brief story. In December 2003 a colleague and I were on a slow train between Birmingham and Oxford and we struck up a conversation with a sixth-form student sitting opposite. She was doing A levels. I asked her if she was going to do a gap year, and she said, "No." So I asked why not, and she said something that will remain with me forever. She said: "I want to get all my learning done, and out of the way." And I thought to myself – how wrong you are!

The point of this story is that there seem to be many organisations in the ESD business which act in this way – which act as if they have got their own learning out of the way and done with, and are now passing it onto others without bothering to continue to learn much themselves. This will be an idea that pervades this talk.

I'm going to talk about ESD, about education more generally – and about learning. Let me begin with what might be a familiar piece of rhetoric:

"We are at an historic turning point"
"There is nothing more important than educating our children."

These are sentiments that we all might agree with – more or less. Of course, if you're going to talk about ESD it's necessary to think about sustainable development itself. But doing this isn't easy – for two main reasons. One of the difficulties is its abstract nature. As the UN secretary-general reminds us:

"Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract – sustainable development – and turn it into a reality for all the world's people."
Kofi Annan

Another difficulty is its future focus. It is hard enough to think about the here and now without the complication of thinking about the world that our grandchildren's grandchildren will know. No one here knows what 2015 – the end of the Decade – will look like – let alone 2115 and yet we are encouraged to think about it, and plan for it. Public policy is made, and hitherto unimaginable things get proposed: such as personal, tradable carbon allowances. This combination of abstract and future must be a strong factor in the public's lack of understanding and interest. UK research for Defra in 2004 reported that only about one third of people claim to have heard of the term sustainable development, and that only one in ten claim to understand what it means. This research concluded that information campaigns would not do much to improve matters. So where does this leave education programmes that might help us think about sustainable development? Policy-makers tend to suppose that engaging in ESD will help bring sustainable development about. Unesco has put it like this:

"Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. ESD

- applies transdisciplinary educational methods and approaches to develop an ethic for lifelong learning;
- fosters respect for human needs that are compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and the needs of the planet; and
- nurtures a sense of global solidarity."

I heard an English teacher in Shrewsbury two weeks ago put it somewhat more graphically. She said this to her year 7s in a response to a class discussion of a poem about waste and destruction, and who caused it:

"We shall need to think about how we live."

We shall indeed, but, however you look at the idea of sustainable development, it necessarily embodies a number of tensions:

- Tensions between**
- economic development, environmental quality and social justice
 - the present and future
 - the local and the global, and ...
 - human needs and wants

These are permanent tensions which cannot be wished, legislated, or educated away, no matter how good the ESD programme is. But, of course, not everyone really seems to want to believe this.

What changes in what we think is the emphasis given to different aspects. During the 1990s, for example, this policy language shifted markedly from environmental quality to quality of life, from an emphasis on the integrity of biospheric systems, to a focus on social justice. But we really do need to try harder to emphasise both of these – and their interconnectedness – as the Prime Minister reminded us last month in his Mansion House speech when two of his 3 priorities for the world were: climate change and poverty. His 3rd, of course, was terrorism. A new triple bottom line, maybe.

And yet, the underlying idea of sustainable development remains hard to talk and teach about. Perhaps this is because we don't really understand why it is, that *how* we live now is problematic, and thus find it hard to understand how we *might* live – or, indeed, might *have* to live in the future? This seems to me to be a crucial issue with which to engage, and which schools and community groups are well placed to do.

I want to turn now to the question of just how serious the ecological and social crisis is, and to some work from Germany to explore this. In a forthcoming edition of *Environmental Education Research*, the most prominent German commentator on ESD, Gerhard de Haan says this:

"To what extent are societies in the position to cope with the sweeping and far-reaching transformation that the concept of future-compliant [sustainable] development demands? That this [transformation] cannot be accomplished without a far-reaching modification in the human way of life, without a major shift in our dominant patterns of production and consumption, and without a new orientation in planning and decision-making processes – worldwide – is one of the most widely shared fundamental insights in the sustainability debate."

de Haan doesn't question this need for fundamental change, this far-reaching transformation ... of our way of life, this major shift in dominant patterns of production and consumption, this new orientation in planning and decision-making. He accepts that this *is* one of the most widely shared, fundamental insights in the sustainability debate. He also takes for granted that radical socio-economic change is needed if we are to cope with the extent and seriousness of the problem. But, he does question whether we are yet in a position to address all this.

Of course, it is one thing to understand that there is a problem, another to recognise that the problem is serious. But it is quite another to understand that fundamental change is needed to address the problem, and then something quite different again to understand the sort of change that is needed – and how to do something about all this. It is possible to be in denial at any of these levels. Many of us will, agree with de Haan on this and respond accordingly:

Is there a problem?	YES		
Is it serious?		YES	
Is fundamental change needed?			YES
What do we need to do?			
How are we to do this?			

Many of us will go farther and think that we have answers of some sort to the last two questions. But let me re-phrase that: Far too many of us think we have the answers to these questions. I say this because I think that we will mostly be wrong about this because future learning is implicated in both those questions; that is to say, we shall need to learn both what we shall need to do, and to learn how we are to do it. And if someone says anything different, they will be deluding both themselves (which is fair enough) and you (which is not). For the rest of this talk, I shall, like de Haan, assume that these three YESs are fully justified.

But who shares this view? Does our government? Does the DfES? Does Unesco? And, crucially, do they *act* as if they do? Just how this Decade plays out will be crucially dependent on the responses to such questions. Well, by their works ye shall know them. So, let's look at Unesco.

The published implementation plan seems a much less radical document than the draft I read last year, but it also seems more balanced in the weight it gives to issues of social justice and ecological integrity. Of course, it must be very hard to get any such document through the UN's myriad committees where no one's interests can be offended – *and* be radical as well.

The Implementation plan says this:

The DESD promotes a set of underlying values, relational processes and behavioural outcomes, which should characterize learning in all circumstances ... The overall goal ... is to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. This educational effort will encourage changes in behaviour that will create a more sustainable future ... for present and future generations.

I'm uneasy with such sentiments – if I read them literally – because they seem to reflect the over-confidence that pervades the sector, and because UN agencies tend to assume that learning is only important *after* experts have decided what it is that should be learned. But perhaps I'm the only one here who doesn't know what these "principles, values, practices and behaviours" ought to be? I had certainly hoped not to see the phrase 'behavioural outcomes' in the document.

Well, however you read it, there does seem to be a considerable tension here, and such normative sentiments seem misplaced – unwise even – in the face of so much uncertainty. In any event it is hard to see any of the UN's goals being achieved without a great deal of learning across all sectors, arising from experience, from work in schools, colleges and universities, from training, and through professional and institutional development, because, sustainable development, if it ever happens, will be a process in which we all learn all the time, and its cause is unlikely to be advanced by any group that simply asserts its right and authority to teach others without learning itself.

So, what about the UK government? It seems to me that there is a curiosity about the UK policy situation. We have a government which, in many ways, acts as if the world has a set of problems which demand urgent and radical action, and these will be familiar.

going beyond Kyoto targets	subsidies for renewable energy sources
encouragement of low-carbon technologies	the carbon-change levy
the European emissions trading scheme	the emphasis on sustainable consumption
debt relief for developing countries	reform of the CAP

and there is rhetoric aplenty to support this which the Prime Minister, at least, seems to be sincere about. And then there's the business as usual message all around us. There is also evidence of policy positions that contradict all this, for example how the government has backed off increasing fuel taxes and eased industry's emissions allowances.

But we are all party to this ambivalence. A recent poll reported in the Economist that showed that whilst 94% of British people think climate change is an important issue, 62% of them – of us that is – put economic growth before carbon reduction. The government seems uncertain, in this admittedly very uncertain world, about what to say to us. Perhaps it genuinely doesn't know whether society will need very radical social restructuring, or whether a few gradual tweaks to the policy mix will do.

So, what will it be?

taxation	regulation	advocacy
advertising	exhortation	financial (dis)incentives
social marketing	moralising	conditioning
transport restrictions	lifestyle limits	rationing

with education somewhere in this mix; which brings us to the DfES.

Objective 1 of the DfES action plan says this

"All learners will develop the skills, knowledge and value base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society."

Many will see this as a better statement in many ways than that which I quoted earlier from Unesco. It doesn't, for example, talk about behavioural outcomes. Nor is it obviously setting out to promote a set of values that it doesn't define. It may even be that the Department thinks that our understanding of such skills, knowledge and values will need to evolve, but that is unclear, although it would fit with its response to the

Environmental Audit Committee's report, where it stressed the freedom given to schools to experiment and develop individual responses to the challenge that sustainable development presents. But the Department is not consistent – and also presents two sets of messages. There are the business as usual messages, for example about raising standards in literacy and numeracy, that are so important. And then there's ESD – or is there?

If you go to the DfES website you'll find a set of pages on sustainable development and what it terms 'sustainable development education' where the phrase ESD is hardly mentioned. However, leaving semantics aside, looking at what the DfES says about sustainable development education you cannot help but be impressed at the range of things that are mentioned. These include the following:

food, farming and the countryside school transport & travel plans the global dimension the school in the community environmental management & assessment	the outdoor classroom school meals & healthy living international education extended schools school building
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This is an broadly constructed prospectus that maps well onto what schools already do, and if you were a teacher, you'd find a lot in here that your school was interested in, and already doing, maybe, right across the curriculum. However, the danger is that, knowing little about ESD or sustainable development, you might come to the view that, if you did all this, you'd actually be addressing the issues the planet faces, and what might be done about them.

As the DfES's puts it:

"[making] sure that children, young people and adult learners are aware that what they do in their day to day lives has huge implications for everyone in this country and in the world at large."

The danger is that you might think you were doing ESD. I say this because ESD has to involve more than a string of unconnected activities – no matter how good these might be – and I'm not convinced that the Department fully realizes this yet. There are certainly some very intriguing contradictions: Take citizenship: Why is this part of core provision, while ESD is not? Changing the English people's relationship with the State is a priority, it seems, but challenging their relationship with the biosphere and the rest of humanity, isn't.

Or take the Department's draft manifesto on 'education outside the classroom', where there is no mention of ESD which is really strange given the emphasis within the document on issues inherent to sustainable development. For example:

"... schools must extend learning using resources outside the classroom and reflect issues such as land management, conservation/heritage and environmental stewardship."

Why is this? Whose interests are served by this omission?

Then there is the recent White Paper which is where these two quotes came from.

"We are at an historic turning point ..."
 Tony Blair:
 "There is nothing more important than educating our children."
 Ruth Kelly:

But they were not talking about sustainable development, ESD or the Decade, despite change being the focus of the White Paper.

The DfES's approach in relation to schools seems in stark contrast to the challenge provided to the higher education sector. Here, the higher education funding council has developed a support strategy setting out its vision for higher education's contribution to sustainable development, and an action plan. During 2005, the council consulted on both documents and invited everyone involved in higher education, to respond. And they did. They found it controversial, of course. But sustainable development is controversial – something, again, I'm not sure that the DfES fully acknowledges. The funding council is attempting in all this to help universities engage with sustainable development because the government thinks that higher education has a significant contribution to make.

The demands made of schools, and of agencies that work both with them, and in communities, seem half-hearted by contrast. When, I wonder, will schools be faced with the same sort of challenge offered to universities? As a school governor, I'm waiting for the opportunities that this will bring. I hope that the

Secretary of State will feel able to offer such a challenge to Heads, and Chairs of Governors. I say this because however much of what goes on in the Decade might be up to formal, voluntary and community groups, on the ground, some leadership from the top is vital.

Of course, it could be that the government doesn't think that schools have all that much to contribute – that having higher education address sustainable development is how to get best value, and some sort of case might be made for this. But this is not what Unesco expects of the government with the Decade. Unesco says that the objectives of an integrated approach to the Decade from government ministries at all levels are the following:

- declare ESD a priority and where possible to incorporate it into national sustainable development plans and national education plans;
- align policy, mandates, and other such frameworks to support ESD;
- enable widespread awareness and understanding of education for sustainable development;
- assist educators and trainers with the relevant knowledge and information to address ESD;
- promote research and development for ESD;
- build cooperative networks of human and financial capital.

All these seem significant, and the farther down this list you go, the more there is that still needs to be done. But, if we are right, and the problem that we face is as serious as de Haan sets out, then what we are talking about here seems close to a shift in worldview. The 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Wangari Maathai, said as much last year in her acceptance speech:

"In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground."

The Biologist, Mary Clark, argues that there have only been two occasions in Western history where a society has thought its way into a new way of living. The first was in the Greek City states in the age of Pericles. The second time, Clark says, was through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment when Western culture, through its natural and social philosophers subjected itself to critical thought and renewal. The result was the worldview that we retain today; the one that many now believe is implicated in the environmental crisis that affects us all. The irony is, of course, that the Enlightenment also brought new values and political and social freedoms that most would wish to defend.

Clark says that we do need a new worldview, and that education has a crucial role to play. As Stephen Sterling has noted, Clark makes the penetrating distinction between an education that moulds the young to fit in with traditional beliefs, and an education that enables a critique of beliefs and aids the creation of new ways of thinking. The big problem with Clark's argument is that education, as we know it today was not involved in the first two revolutions. However, her argument makes sense if we substitute the idea of learning, and say that, if we are to reach out to a new way of living, it is learning, that will have a crucial role to play.

Gehard de Haan agrees:

"Where a major mental shift is primarily involved, we must encourage the processes for changing awareness among individuals – and this can only be accomplished through learning."

In this sense, the role of ESD is to stimulate that learning and help build our capability to live sustainably.

But learning what? In Germany, ESD has gone down the line of competencies. Specifying not what is to be taught, but what is to be learned:

"A competence-oriented education ... asks: what problem-solving strategies, concepts, and abilities for social action should [pupils] have? ... [focusing on] ... motivations, and ... experiences ... will increase pupils' interest in the acquisition of skills."

In the German context, 8 ESD competencies are specified under a heading which means the specific capacity to act and solve problems. This is similar to the Danish notion of action competence. These are:

- Gestaltungskompetenz
- foresighted thinking
 - interdisciplinary work
 - transcultural understanding and cooperation
 - participatory skills
 - planning and implementation skills
 - empathy, compassion, and solidarity
 - self-motivation and in motivating others
 - distanced reflection on individual and cultural models

The idea is that those who possess such competence can help, through their active participation in society, to modify and shape the future, and to guide social, economic, technological, and ecological change. As you can imagine, these are elaborated upon in some detail, and seem to be applicable to both school and adult contexts.

An alternative view is found in the UK where the government's Sustainable Development Education Panel elaborated a set of key concepts in sustainable development. You'll find these on the QCA website:

- The seven key concepts of sustainable development education
1. Interdependence
 2. Citizenship and stewardship
 3. Needs and rights of future generations
 4. Diversity
 5. Quality of life
 6. Sustainable change
 7. Understanding and precaution.

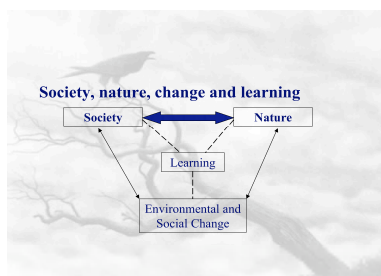
Like the German concepts, they have also been elaborated – in this case into learning outcomes in terms of knowledge / skills and values. It seems to me that these are also capable of being extended into life-long learning.

So is it to be skills? Or knowledge and understanding? Well, it may be both, but it all looks suspiciously neat and tidy, as though we know with confidence what we need to do. Given that we can't possibly know this, maybe we need another approach.

There is another *possibility* for thinking about learning. It is particularly useful where the following conditions apply:

- Conditions**
- the nature of many problems lack precise specification
 - what can be known in the present is not always adequate
 - desired 'end-states' cannot be specified with confidence
 - there are competing problem definitions
 - participants have incompatible value-sets

This seems to me to fit what we know of sustainable development quite well because it seems very clear that the complexity and uncertainty we face cannot be wished (or educated) away. Of course, change of some kind will happen whether it is planned and managed well, badly, or at all. Diagrammatically we can picture this as follows where change is an ever-present factor, but where learning is only a possibility:



But if we are to influence environmental and social change, learning has to be essential and integral to any approach to change. In the circumstances I outlined, the key role for learning seems to be to:

develop learners' ability to make sound choices in the face of the inherent complexity and uncertainty of the future.

Such an approach gives people a central role in setting agenda for both learning and action, and values the contribution that differing perspectives bring to this. There is some evidence that policy-makers in different fields may be increasingly receptive to this view. In 2003, the UN Director-General's Special Envoy for Sustainable Development argued this:

"Education's main contribution [to sustainable development] should be to familiarise learners with perspectives other than their own."

Note the ambiguous *their* in this sentence. This has to mean perspectives other than the *learner's* own, and, other than the *teacher's* own.

But I wonder about the extent to which we are geared up to doing this. This is an important question for NGOs and the formal sector, and is, perhaps, one of the key tests of an organisation committed to learning, as opposed to teaching, and a measure of its openness to learning itself. There is an important distinction to be made in what we do, between education and persuasion. Just how good are we at drawing this line? Well, many organisations involved in ESD do seem to find all this a bit difficult.

The main debate, for many, seems to be about *which* set of skills and knowledge should be the primary target for others to learn. And such approaches inevitably tend to root our thinking about the future firmly in what we know in the present, or rather what we *think* we know, or, too often perhaps, what we'd *like* to think we know. We have seen this in both the German and UK examples where the necessary skills and knowledge are set out with confidence, and it is this same framework that *Defra* uses to allocate its *Environmental Action Funds* to voluntary and community sector groups. In this, *Defra*'s focus is explicitly on behaviour change, and applicants have to have well-defined objectives, and measurable outcomes. There is no obvious requirement that applicants have to learn anything themselves.

It was the primacy of this sort of accountability that led to the withdrawal of funding from the *Council for Environmental Education*, the irony here being that this was one of the few organisations dedicated to the very kind of reflexive learning that we need, or capable of providing impartial advice to those who cared to listen. The damage done by the deeply regrettable dispersal of CEE's intellectual capital is incalculable.

I am arguing here that the key skill in the circumstances we now do seem to face is the ability to manage, individually and collectively, a nexus of environmental and social actions where problems have contested definitions and highly contingent solutions. In this, we shall need to improve our scientific understanding, while simultaneously examining and re-examining the values we bring to bear, and any teaching we might do in such circumstances should involve the rigour of being very clear about the following:

Necessary teaching disciplines

- when we *really* know something (we might decide to teach it)
- when we *really* don't (we might decide to 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 seems clear that this sort of approach to learning is already happening in those sectors whose work brings them face to face with the challenges inherent in sustainable development, where there is both uncertainty, and the need to take action. If this argument is right why aren't such open-ended approaches, and the skills implicit in them, featuring in the work of more educational institutions – formal and informal? Surely not to rise to this challenge is to settle for the safe, the secure, the known, the comfortable, when the world would seem to be becoming *none* of those things. Just how fast, and how far, to go is not for me to tell you, but this is surely a journey that we all need to make, one way or another. And as I said, I think this applies to schools, colleges, universities, and the voluntary and community sectors. And it is this sort of challenge which, perhaps, the DfES might issue to us all, and not just universities.

In what happens over the Decade, it seems particularly important that experience and confidence be achieved at a pace that makes sense to all stakeholders. As problems, failures and disappointments are to be expected, the priority must be for all to share, and learn from them. Such ESD leadership and innovation might well include the following among its priorities:

Leadership and innovation priorities

- commissioning research into the mainstreaming of sustainable development issues within formal and life-long learning
- the encouragement of small-scale innovation, monitoring and evaluating such initiatives, and disseminating what works – and doesn't
- networking practitioners in order aid our ability to understand what we know – and don't know
- the better use of existing research.

with an emphasis on learning throughout.

How people view the world, and what they *do* in relation to this, matters, because it makes a difference to how things turn out; that is, to how the human-environment relationship co-evolves. And what people learn *matters* because it informs and enables what we can do next. Reassuringly, what people learn isn't always what others try to teach, which is why people, and what they learn, are crucial to sustainable development. Such factors are fundamental to our being able to think about sustainable development, and for progress to be made in ways that make contextual and cultural sense to us. If learning can sensibly be viewed as a social process to make our experience of the future somehow better, then sustainable development might be understood and operationalised in the way that John Foster sets out:

Sustainable development

a process of making the emergent future ecologically sound and humanly habitable *as it emerges*, through the continuous responsive learning which is the human species' most characteristic endowment

This kind of centrality for the concept and practice of learning, represents a radical shift of view. From this new perspective, it is in the dynamics of social learning that sustainable development exists. And, as Jane Jacobs has argued, a vigorous culture capable of making corrective, stabilizing changes depends heavily on people having critical capacities and depth of understanding of the issues. The draft Unesco document was kind enough to quote Stephen Gough and myself when we wrote something very similar:

"By learning throughout our lives we equip ourselves to choose most advantageously as the future unfolds."

and we went on to say this:

"This would not bring about sustainable development. Rather, it would be evidence that sustainable development was happening."

I want to leave one final thought with you, which sums up what I have been saying. It is to suggest to you that there is a particular way of thinking about of sustainable development which captures the core role for learning as a collaborative and reflective process, captures the inter-generational dimension, and captures the idea of environmental limits. It is this:

Sustainable development
– a social learning process of improving the human condition;
– a process which can be continued indefinitely without undermining itself.

This seems to me to neatly capture the existential and moral challenge we face. If that's right, then determining the most effective ways of encouraging and enabling such learning seem the most appropriate task for the Decade.

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