

## **Only Experience Can Bring Us To The Truth**

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Recently, I had a conversation with a good friend (Richard Bakal) and he told me a story that I will repeat in order to help frame this piece. The story involves an author, John Jerome who wrote 11 books on a wide variety of topics. But, not a one of his books every received any commercial success. The author's brother-in-law, noticing how hard Jerome labored on each project asked him a simple question:” Why do you work so hard when you know few people will ever read your work?” As the story goes, Jerome replied that the writing was useful because through his writing he got to “explain the world to himself.” In a similar fashion I am trying to explain a small part of the world to myself and you are invited to accompany me.

I'm deeply concerned that many of us who have spent most of our careers focused on the broad topic of sustainability in one form or another, have been so ineffective in changing the behavior and opinions of people. As just one example, how can it be that intelligent individuals are still debating the question of global warming? I'm not talking about the causes of global warming; I'm talking about the simple fact that the earth is growing warmer. Recently, I was flying between meetings and the two men behind me were engaged in one of those too loud conversations that one tries to ignore but keeps inserting itself into the psyche until you give up and eavesdrop in earnest. Both men were agreeing that global warming was not really happening and that the issue was primarily political. As I listened, I heard each man try to justify his position by offering vague and often contradictory supporting information. Although I am generalizing from a very small sample, one conversation, I know that this conversation, or one very much like it, is taking place repeatedly. There is a serious lack of understanding regarding climate change and I believe those of us connected with this issue have often failed to make a compelling argument because we have used the traditional educational approach rather than supplementing this approach with experiential education.

The traditional approach is based on the assumption that people change their behavior and their beliefs, almost exclusively based upon information they receive. So, we have continually and consistently provided ever increasing mountains of information in the hope that everyone will quickly see that this information neatly proves our point. It is true that earlier in our development as a species we needed information to know what to do. But today, there is so much information supporting any position one might want to take that information without experience results in the type of conversation I referred to while on the plane.

I believe this lack of understanding about climate change, sustainability and indeed several other complex issues, is rooted in a fundamental problem that may not have been created through our traditional educational system but it has been supported and amplified by the pedagogy often employed to support this system. Because we have been primarily focused on the dispensing of information and not on the experiences that will support this information, we have helped create generations of learners who are increasingly information rich but experience poor. We are losing our ability to distinguish between subjective beliefs and objective truth. Because there is an endless

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supply of information and research available to support almost any opinion. We've come to a point where any opinion seems as valid as any other.

I'd like to focus on the difference between objective truth and subjective belief and why an inability to distinguish between these two orientations has thwarted much of the progress we might have made towards sustainability in any area. Objective truth is something that exists whether we believe it or not. For example, if I hold a pencil out in front of me and drop it, gravity will cause the pencil to fall. Regardless of my opinion, wishes, desires or faith, the objective truth of gravity will exert its influence on the pencil and it will fall. On the other hand, there are many things that depend upon our belief in them in order for them to be true. If I were to mention any of the following nouns: Ford, Chevrolet, Christian, Jew, Arab, rich, poor, many of us would have beliefs and expectations that are associated with these words. Some of our beliefs are in fact true, but many of our beliefs are simply the personal-subjective opinions we've developed. Because many of us fail to distinguish between objective fact and subjective belief we naturally assume that all opinion is fundamentally someone's subjective reality. So, the question of global warming can, in the eyes of many, be dismissed as simply a discussion involving different and equally valid "beliefs" about this issue. In philosophy this would be referred to as relativism. But it's more complicated than the classic definition of relativism because it involves an inability to accept that one's preference is rooted in opinion not fact. If you like Fords and I like Chevy that's fine, but if we both fail to accept that on any particular feature of these vehicles there may be research that will give us the "true" superiority of one over the other on just that item, we substitute objective truth for subjective belief.

An over-reliance on information alone and unattached to experience, helps create the necessary environment for this failure to distinguish between truth and beliefs. False subjective beliefs can often be supported by increased access to information but they are rarely supported by increased access to experiences. The more we actually experience things and use the information available to supplement and complement our knowledge, the greater and more accurate the understanding. One might have the opinion, based on information that they were given, that global warming wasn't happening but if one had the experience of visiting the various glaciers on the planet there could be no doubt that things are changing. Experience in this example can validate or contradict the subjective beliefs that we might hold.

I know that readers of this Journal are committed to experiential education and I urge all of us to continually examine how we are teaching and try to the extent possible to provide experiences to support the information. As seductive as it feels to present a tight power point with dissolving images and imbedded YouTube links we need to constantly try to help create experiences where the learner can try to use the information and check it against their beliefs.

Since the first edition of this Journal we have been able to read excellent pieces that can inform our teaching, but the potency of these offerings is related to our own subjective belief about how people learn. The jury is in! People learn best when they are exposed

to information and given an opportunity to experience this new information in the world. As I mentioned at the beginning of this short piece, I'm trying to "explain the world to myself" and my conclusion is to recommitt to experiential education whenever possible and reject simply dispensing information.