

Education for Sustainability Essentials

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When trying to consolidate my thinking about sustainability education in preparation for a talk a few years ago, I asked myself two questions: What is sustainability? And what kinds of people seem most likely to help humanity move in that direction? I then tried to answer these questions in the most direct and succinct way possible. In answer to the first question, it struck me that members of a sustainable society would observe three rules:

- Don't eat your seed corn or cut down your forests.
- Don't pump your wastes or other toxins into water, land, or air.
- Don't allow some people to have so much that others are unable to live secure and meaningful lives.

These ideas are quite simple on the surface, but they are regularly violated by industrial societies, one of the reasons for framing them in the negative. There are other possibilities that could be inserted here—"Observe the precautionary principle" comes to mind—but these three seemed to capture the essence of a course I taught about envisioning a sustainable society for seventeen years. Thinking about the work of permaculturalists and their impatience with the term sustainability and interest in creating abundance rather than sufficiency, it strikes me that it might be possible to say even more simply: "Align your actions with the principles of life to reverse the effects of entropy." People who did this would not be breaking the three fundamental rules listed above, but that might not be immediately apparent at the beginning of the transition from where we are now to where we need to go.

With regard to the second question--what kind of human beings seem likely to help create societies and cultures in which these principles are in evidence--four things came to mind. Such people would:

- Feel connected enough to their place and community to want to get involved
- Understand the nature of humanity's current circumstances
- Have the capacity to analyze and then solve problems
- Possess the confidence and willingness to take action with others

Each of these is moderately self-explanatory, but I'll take a little time to unpack them.

Feel connected enough to place and community to want to get involved.

One of the defining characteristics of life in industrial societies is alienation, a form of disconnection that contributes to a loss of social membership, responsibility, and involvement. This disconnection can be to both human and natural communities. What our time on the clock of the universe demands is widespread participation in the shaping of whatever social formation needs to take the place of the one that is currently creating so many of our problems. We can't know at this point what that new social formation will be, but given the gravity of our circumstances, I would

argue that we need as many people as possible contributing their ideas and energy to this endeavor. That participation seems much more likely to occur if people feel a deep sense of affiliation with the communities and places where they live. Stephen Jay Gould once wrote that “People only protect what they love.” Love grows out of regular and sustained contact. Teachers can help contribute to its emergence and development by regularly providing students with opportunities to spend time in nearby natural places and human neighborhoods. People need to once more feel at home in their own parts of the world, alive to the possibilities of their senses and their hearts, and alert to the contributions they can make to the health and welfare of others, both human and more than human.

Understand the nature of humanity’s current circumstances. Achieving this end is not easy. It is counter-intuitive to see human beings as a force of nature rather than the victims of nature, but this is the reason formal and informal educators across the planet need to acquaint as many people as possible with what is happening as our species comes to inhabit, impact, and alter more and more of the natural world and its fundamental working systems. It’s also extraordinarily difficult for human beings to grasp the implications of actions and changes over time. We appear to be genetically predisposed to focus on the present and, for the sake of our mental stability, ignore the possibilities of future danger. Recognizing the threat posed by human activities that on the surface seem unproblematic now eludes a significant proportion of the global population. The difficulty is that waking up to these issues can be so psychologically disorienting that it induces fear, withdrawal, denial, or despair. For this reason, it seems imperative that explorations of our current circumstances are coupled with experiences that give students the opportunity to engage in projects and service learning activities that provide them with a sense of their own ability to effect positive change, however small. This then leads to the final two points.

Have the capacity to analyze and then address problems. Negotiating the future on our changing planet will require creativity and the ability to address many problems that could well lie outside the experience of modern humans. What will we do, for example, if the current drought in California extends for decades or centuries, as the geological record suggests it could, rather than the five to ten years of recent history? It does not seem farfetched to argue that contemporary crises could well require adaptations and cultural shifts as deep as those created by our ancestors during the agricultural and industrial revolutions. Those changes seem the likely result of people using their minds, individually and collectively, to study situations with care and attention, taking into account factors that were impinging on the health and stability of their communities, and then deciding on courses of action that could be pursued and assessed. Attempting to solve problems is part of what it means to be human. Children are drawn into this process when the problems are authentic, novel, and approachable. Educators could do much more to provide young people with opportunities to bring their perspectives to school, neighborhood, community, regional, and even global issues. As a colleague has observed, the primary value that young people bring to their communities is the fact

that they aren't adults; their ways of thinking have not yet become reified into the tracks laid down by industrial cultures. This resource—perhaps the primary reason I have some hope for the future—needs to be tapped and developed.

Possess the confidence and willingness to take action with others.

Interviews I conducted two decades ago with environmental activists in the Pacific Northwest revealed that nearly everyone had had experiences as children and adolescents that confirmed their ability to act as successful change agents. Unfortunately, such experiences are not common. It is not surprising that political apathy is as widespread as it is. The future will require much more. We are facing a planetary emergency that calls for all hands on deck. One way to engender this confidence is to create opportunities for action initially at the school and then the neighborhood and community level as children get older. By collaborating with community agencies, non-profits, and businesses, educators can provide students with a range of opportunities aimed at giving them the chance to do things like writing a forest plan for a private landowner, organizing their community to reduce high levels of diesel exhaust, creating with the public a 10-year economic development plan for their county, restoring a local wetland by replacing invasive species with native ones, or gaining approval for and then constructing a memorial plaque commemorating a speech about fair housing given in their town a half century before by Martin Luther King, Jr. Children and youth can make valuable contributions to their communities, something that affirms their own competence and worth. People who have tasted the satisfaction that can accompany such actions develop a taste for action. If cultivated systematically, schools could become seedbeds for advocates and actors.

What I have described here is primarily a set of dispositions rather than a skill set or knowledge base. Skills and knowledge will be a necessary component of what people in the future will need to lay the foundations for more sustainable and just societies. I hesitate to say too much about what these may be, though, largely because I don't think we can adequately anticipate what the future will require. I have friends who argue that any grand solutions that arise from our current cultural formation will be infected with the ways of thinking that have brought us to our current impasse. I tend to agree with them. What seems essential is cultivating those human attributes that have allowed people to respond to changing conditions in the past in ways that supported their communities and maintained the integrity of the ecosystems of which they were a part. I think of how the Aborigines in Australia adapted first to an ice age and then the ending of an ice age while maintaining a common and apparently continent-wide understanding of what it means to live intelligently in place. Their ability to persist for 50,000 years or more suggests that we may have the capacity to do the same.