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Book Review: Sustainability Education: Possibilities Across Higher Education

Jay M. Shuttleworth
Columbia University

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Sustainability Education: Possibilities Across Higher Education

Reviewed by Jay M. Shuttleworth

Jones, P., Selby, D. & Sterling, S. (Eds.) (2010). *Sustainability Education: Perspectives and Practice Across Higher Education*. London: Earthscan. 2010. ISBN 978-1-84407-877-6

In this book, edited by Paula Jones, David Selby, and Stephen Sterlin, scholars explore the pedagogical opportunities for teaching about sustainability education (SE) in different college-level disciplines. An SE framework advances the idea that teaching about resource preservation should also emphasize the needs of “all humans.” SE does not abandon the goal of preserving scenic areas like Yellowstone National Park (Solow, 1992); it merely introduces a focus of learning on how the present generation can meet its needs while not jeopardizing future generations’ ability to meet their needs (Anand & Sen, 2000). Nolet (2009), for example, writes that:

An underlying (as yet untested) assumption is that sustainability education will result in citizens who are more likely to engage in personal behaviors or contribute to public policy decisions in the best interest of the environmental commons and future generations (p. 418).

This definition posits that an SE framework aims to empower students to act on behalf of their needs and others’ needs. It also seeks to mitigate young people’s declining interest in addressing environmental degradation, as reported by Twenge (2006). Jones, Selby, and Sterling seek to demonstrate how SE could address these issues in a broad range of higher education disciplines.

Thus, this book provides an “eclectic demonstration of the art of the possible” (p. 12) in higher education that one familiar with SE might not automatically think of. For example, some disciplinary examinations include dance, drama and music, social work, theology, and nursing. It also includes chapters devoted to disciplines with more familiar SE possibilities like engineering and economics.

The editors organize the book into 17 chapters. The first four chapters address the possibilities of teaching SE through an interdisciplinarity framework. They define interdisciplinarity as a teaching strategy where a topic receives at-

tention across multiple contiguous or proximate disciplines (instead of unrelated ones). Across the initial chapters of the book, they present the case that since humans live in an interconnected world, SE teaching should be decompartmentalized and should reveal pedagogical possibilities that bridge the theory- practice gap.

In the subsequent 13 chapters, scholars from a diverse range of disciplines address four research questions examining the teaching possibilities of SE in their area of expertise. Through these research questions, authors are asked to 1) report on the current status of SE instruction in their field, 2) address opportunities for teaching and learning, 3) identify possible obstacles, and 4) highlight innovative pedagogies. The majority of the book focuses on how each of the authors address these questions in light of their respective disciplines.

Regarding the state of SE curriculum, responses were diverse. This outcome seemed predictable, as the book included subjects with well-established practices for including SE (like engineering), while some scholars (for example, those in dance, drama, and music) admitted their discipline had “the hardest fit” accommodating SE into their curriculum (p. 156). However, the rich and varied responses across the chapters revealed some common cross-field themes.

Many authors reported a need to close the gap between theory and practice. For example, in discussing teacher education, Robert Cook, Roger Cutting, and Denise Summers (Chapter 17) pointed out that faculty were spending too much time on “diversions” like developing “bold statements” or definitional modules within SE instead of formulating classroom applications (p. 314). In their chapter on international trends, Arjen Wals and John Blewitt made similar observations; they described the gap between rhetoric and practice as “striking”. In fact, the editors noted that most of the discourse about SE exists within research instead of teaching. Such a situation is not uncommon, as sustainability researchers have previously identified the problematic nature of focusing too much on theory (e.g., Orr, 2004;

Hopwood, 2007).

From these state of the field observations emerged opportunities for embedding an issues-based framework within SE curricula. For example, several chapter authors identified a dialogical approach as a promising practice for SE. The authors defined such a strategy as teaching through “interactive, discursive methods” instead of by “one-way transmission” of information through lecturing (p. 41). Citing a need for discussion, other authors identified the potential of discussing the social issues associated with SE in their academic fields. For example, in writing about business pedagogy (Chapter 5), Delyse Springett highlighted opportunities for students to engage in learning opportunities guided by questions like, “Who holds the power to maintain the status quo? [and] How do they attain and maintain that power?” (p. 80). Through questions like these, Springett suggests that student learning might benefit from basing whole-class dialogue around questions with multiple, potentially complex responses.

Chapter authors also reported obstacles for implementing SE in their discipline’s curriculum. For example, Robert Cook, Roger Cutting, and Denise Summers observed that many campus administrators succeeded in making buildings more efficient or updating policies to embrace green attitudes. Yet, curricular updates moved at far slower paces, if at all, according to Kleiman. Other challenges mentioned across the chapters included questions related to 1) how to teach SE in a truly transformative way (and not in an additive or “bolt-on” strategy [p. 319]) and 2) how to educate faculty who were interested in implementing SE but knew little about its theoretical basis.

Despite these (and other) challenges, many chapter authors disclosed potential and classroom-tested innovations that draw on a social issues-based approach. For example, Paul Kleiman, in writing about music education, (Chapter 9) proposed students could minimize their use of ear buds to consider “shifts in attitude and behaviour” that engage “the emotions and senses as well as the intellect...” (p. 156). The learning objectives within such a strategy encouraged students to develop their listening skills; in this way, students might be able to develop “a sustainable aural understanding and thus a greater relationship with the changing sonic planet” (p. 156). Other recommended inquiries centered around questions like, “How might music have contributed to this [environmental] problem? (Example: the glorification of the automobile in popular music?)” (p. 166). Similar to the preceding

question, Kleiman framed part of his learning objectives in the analysis of how human choices, via musical influences, might have contributed to unsustainable habits.

Other disciplines have reported similar innovations involving a dialogical approach. In drama, Kleiman noted the innovative strategy of using SE through the use of issues-based theater and identified a particularly successful content example as Henrik Ibsen’s “Enemy of the People.” In theology curriculum, authors Katja Stuerzenhofecker, Rebecca O’Loughlin, and Simon Smith (Chapter 12) recommended a dialogical approach to “the study of the last things or ‘what may be hoped for’” (i.e., eschatology). For example, the authors offered students valuable opportunities to search for solutions to pressing issues within the discipline like the destination of humankind and human responsibility.

Other innovative pedagogies with potential for cross-disciplinary implementation included a concept authors Wals and Blewitt (Chapter 4) referred to as “Gestaltswitching.” They defined this term as a strategy aimed at helping students learn how to switch “between different mindsets... [and] in the context of SE, switching back and forth between disciplinary perspectives” (p. 66). Such a skill is at the center of “Gestaltungskompetenz”—“the ability to look at the world as it unfolds from multiple vantage points” (p. 66).

The strengths of this book unfold in two areas. First, the book could assist the aspiring sustainability educator seeking to learn how a variety of disciplines conceptualize its implementation. Second, the book provides opportunities for more complex considerations for how to teach SE in different and innovative ways. Overall, the book is thorough in its scope, and its scaffolded appeal to both beginning and more experienced SE educators is laudable. The book’s weakness rests in its limited coverage of what students did in the context of the learning opportunities presented to them. For example, the chapters on law, theology, social work, and teacher education discuss compelling possibilities for SE. Yet, the reader might be curious how these ideas worked (or did not work) in context of classroom instruction.

Overall, the book’s findings may prove significant for education researchers and practitioners interested in how SE can be implemented in higher education settings. In general, the book builds upon visions of other editors (e.g., Corcoran & Wals, 2004; Bartlett

& Chase, 2004) who set forth a rich array of perspectives about SE in campus policies and curricula. However, this effort may distinguish itself from these and other earlier works by focusing on a) curricular possibilities and b) an ambitiously wide net of disciplinary applications.

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About the Reviewer

Jay Shuttleworth is a lecturer with the Center for Core Curriculum at Columbia University.