

A Pedagogy for Sustainability Education

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After a career as an experiential and adventure educator, Rick was one of the co-founders and is the current chair of the PhD program in Sustainability Education. As a deep ecologist and ecopsychologist, he seeks to integrate experiences in nature with ways to bring these insights and perspectives into our daily lives and institutions.

Sustainability Education is intended to provide learning, training, and practical experience, in both formal and non-formal settings, that fosters personal development, community involvement, and action for change in our human and natural worlds. Grounded in our experience of the world, Sustainability Education must mirror both the patterns present in our natural environment and the conditions present in our human society with the intention of preparing us for uncertain and rapidly transforming world conditions. Nature is the source of our identity as living beings and society the medium for expressing this. The conditions and needs for our survivability as a species and society will change depending on circumstances and through events that may be outside our control. Our success will depend upon our ability to respond in ways that value personal initiative, responsibility, creativity, commitment, and collaboration with others.

This approach to education is designed to contrast the predominant managerial and mechanistic paradigm of learning, such as exists in most public education settings and in much of higher education, with a more holistic and ecological model that emphasizes the realization of human potential and interdependence of social, economic, and ecological wellbeing. Such learning, exemplified by much of alternative education, is more engaged, experiential, and addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual components of our roles in the world and in human society. This perspective is applicable to interactions in our extended families, local communities and schools, at work in corporations and the marketplace, and in our nation states and governments. It is what takes place when citizens seek to be involved in choosing their futures, engaging in social and political action, and wish to bring humanity and equality to our engagement with others.

Such learning is based on core values of lifelong learning, recognition of diversity, cooperation and collaboration, personal reflection and values, integrative understanding, responsibility and faith in others, and developing learning communities with a commitment to the good of the whole. This involves developing a curriculum (and learning models) that values transdisciplinarity, recognizes that knowledge is provisional and approximate, involves the learner in determining goals and methods, allows for negotiation and flexibility, and promotes local, personal, applied, and first-hand knowledge. The emphasis here is on knowledge that is applicable, practical, inclusive, and self-critical. Evaluation is based on self-evaluation, self-generated indicators, critical feedback and support from others, and assessment that is qualitative as well as quantitative. (Sterling, 2001)

Such education requires ecological management that values all components and participants in the system, seeks positive synergy, and is democratic and participative. In terms of learning and teaching, the goal is to create learning communities and organizations where functional, critical, and creative competencies are valued, where differential needs and learning styles are recognized and honored, and where teachers and students are both learners and collaborators in the learning process. This process involves a wide range of methods and tools to address affective, spiritual, manual, and physical needs as well as cognitive skills and creative

inquiry. (Sterling, 2001) Learners are thus empowered to develop their own learning priorities, to construct their own meaning, and, through application and dialogue, subject it to the scrutiny of their teachers, peers, and the community. This is the kind of learning that emerges where the freedom to choose one's future is assured and where structures exist that support such self-determination.

Sustainability Education has two essential components: Education *for* Sustainability and Education *as* Sustainability. Education for Sustainability is the means and process by which we educate citizens in how to achieve global and local sustainable communities. It challenges the dominant material, ecological, psychological, economic, and social paradigms that define our culture and have led to our current impasse and threatened presence on this planet. Education as Sustainability is the means through which we educate our citizenry to the values, opportunities, and choices each person has to develop one's self as an aware, independent, responsible, and active agent of one's own fate and hence contribute to the future of our society and ecological systems. (Sterling, 2001)

This latter aspect of Sustainability Education explores the very process of education itself, seeking to transform the process through which we learn, live, interact with others, and create meaning in our lives. Such learning "...is essentially transformative, constructive, and participatory" (Sterling, 2001). It is the means through which individuals learn through experience, participation, and reflection and is often referred to as Transformational or Transformative Education. (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000) This is an experiential, developmental process that fully engages learners in the process of their own learning and asks participants to take responsibility for their success, future possibilities, and the survivability of human society and culture.

Learners thus must be encouraged to take their knowledge, assumptions, and skills out into the larger world and test their efficacy in the only medium that matters: the reality of everyday life and our capacity to change systems, institutions, and influence others. The most essential qualifications are openness, curiosity, flexibility, a critical mind, and the willingness to be influenced by others and the opportunities that present themselves to us. (Sterling, 2001) This is what we hope the current issue of the Journal of Sustainability Education embodies and models for others in a variety of circumstances.

Mezirow, Jack et al (2000). *Learning as Transformation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Sterling, Stephen (2001). *Sustainable Education*. Devon, England: Green Books.