

Article

## Deschooling Society? A Lifelong Learning Network for Sustainable Communities, Urban Regeneration and Environmental Technologies

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**Abstract:** The complexity and multifaceted nature of sustainable lifelong learning can be effectively addressed by a broad network of providers working co-operatively and collaboratively. Such a network involving the third, public and private sector bodies must realise the full potential of accredited flexible and blended formal learning, contextual opportunities offered by enablers of informal and non formal learning and the affordances derived from the various loose and open spaces that can make social learning effective. Such a conception informs the new Lifelong Learning Network Consortium on Sustainable Communities, Urban Regeneration and Environmental Technologies established and led by the Lifelong Learning Centre at Aston University. This paper offers a radical, reflective and political evaluation of its first year in development arguing that networked learning of this type could prefigure a new model for lifelong learning and sustainable education that renders the city itself a creative medium for transformative learning and sustainability.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning; sustainability; political; network

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### 1. Introduction: Living in the End Times

We are living in a world that is predominantly urban, increasingly digitally networked but still desperately unequal and too obviously losing its biodiversity and ecological resilience. For the philosopher Slavoj Zizek [1] we are living in the end times characterised, he says, by four antagonisms: the threat of ecological catastrophe; the inappropriate notion of private property when applied to “intellectual property”; the socio-ethical implications of new techno-scientific developments such as biogenetics; and, the creation of new forms of apartheid. To all this, he argues, our response can be

characterised by ideological denial, anger, attempts at amelioration and compromise, depression and withdrawal. The latter response signifies hopelessness and submission. However, sustainability practitioners and educators must, and should, not live these ‘end times’ although to do otherwise is to invite a political reframing and radical pedagogic practice. Many cities, especially in the so called developed world, are multi cultural, multi ethnic and multi faceted but are segregated socially, geographically, culturally, politically and economically. Higher Education Institutions both mirror and respond to this diversity in being quite tardy in developing learning opportunities that foster equality or help shape a more ecologically sustainable world. However, times change and as we progress through the second half of the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development “sustainability” is clearly on the agenda, in the corporate plans, of many higher education institutions even if acting upon the concept is often conditioned by bottom line thinking. Unfortunately, positive changes are happening rather late and at a scale and at a pace that is arguably insufficient, although where it is taking hold attempts at campus greening and curriculum integration are making way for more systemic and innovative change [2].

In the wider world, the economy and the ideology of economic growth still dominates and following the global financial and fiscal crisis of 2008. Capitalism seems to be triumphing through its very weakness and this is expressed in the increasingly louder calls for more skills, higher skills and new skills. But skills in what and for what? We are told we need more information, more data, more research, more and new technologies. Think tanks and research observatories, governments and corporations gather data at an amazing rate publishing findings in many formats which are then distributed widely on the internet, in conferences and seminars. Information is disseminated and diffused through the broader public realm but this is itself becoming increasingly fragmented as the new media ecology resembles an ever changing kaleidoscope of platforms, devices, colours, textures, sounds and images. The information super highway of the 1980s and 1990s produced an information glut rather than a learning society or a significantly greener knowledge economy. It has also produced more stuff, more uncertainties and risks which confront people in their daily lives at home or at work and it is these uncertainties and risks that make lifelong learning, including extra mural university provision, just as important as any learning occurring within the walls of the academy. The risks and uncertainties manifest themselves in ways that can be simultaneously mundane and highly sophisticated for they relate to fundamental questions: how do I live? what do I eat? where do I work, and at what? what and how shall I think? Universities, colleges and schools have to ask other but similar questions: what shall be taught, how shall learning take place and who shall benefit? Public funding for education in the UK is primarily directed at the young when people are living and working longer [3]. At work, in the private sector, the older you are the less likely you are to access the funding necessary for retraining as CPD budgets become more tightly constrained to meet organisational performance needs [4]. If an individual’s learning needs do not correspond with organisational ones then corporate sponsorship will be non-existent. The scrap heap beckons. Higher education predominantly benefits higher socio-economic groups. In the UK higher education funding is currently being reviewed but what is clear is that all students will pay more, part time learners will increase in numbers and the emphasis on skills development and the identification of employer defined intended learning outcomes will strengthen educational ideology of control that sees Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths in an hegemonic position within the academy because of its relevance to

business and economic growth [5]. Complementing this reality we are also in an age of technological silver bullets such as genetic manipulation and nuclear power, where the global corporate empire insists on being seen as responsibly tackling its rising ecological impacts [6].

## 2. Post Ecological Politics

This era of post ecological politics has followed closely on the heels of the post industrial society, post modern culture and a post feminist age emerged when gender inequality has only just about been dented and Chevron brandish their green credentials on global media networks while continuing to fund climate change deniers [7]. We are all green now and it is incumbent on all of us as learners to interrogate and make sense of this absurdity. To do this, learning must be rooted in the experience of living, of navigating the multifaceted and often frightening array of consumer attractions and the dangers of apprehending the real as being simply what you want it to be. There is a need for more analysis and more contemplation in, of and about everyday life, everyday working relationships and the global politico-economic environment enveloping us. Reflective diaries and logs, often a mainstay of many courses, reproduce learning theories that have been reduced to a few slogans—reflect in or on learning, learning is double or single looped or ripples to appear. But reflection is not the same as contemplation or meditation, of staying with or dwelling on. For Heidegger ([8], p. 147).

To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. This word bauen also means to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine...

Reflection and meditation in learning needs to take on a political aspect that facilitates the contestation of an educational apparatus dominated by capital and its associated logics. Knowledge is also increasingly being created politically, collaboratively and collectively in a world where the experts, the high priests of intellectual culture, take a place alongside the buff, the enthusiast, the loosely knit social network where we-think is clearly more generative than academic group-think and where [9,10] cultural and academic gatekeepers still delineate what constitutes knowledge and what methods may produce valid and reliable knowledge. The wiki world is the fast show of contemporary intellectual and popular culture and has profound implications for understanding the future for sustainability in learning and development. The world of what I know is, the world of wiki economics, wiki design and wikipedia is allied to the world of carbon accounting, biosynthesis and cloud computing. There are further risks and uncertainties in this world of shifting and multiple references and disappearing reference points and a further antagonism in securing a cultural space for meaningful, critical, contemplation in a world where the futures market operates to the beat of the nanosecond. This world, full of disruptive technologies and opportunities for the space of flows that encompass economic, social and human capital together environmental contamination, crime and tentative attempts at global citizenship, is lived through the everyday life practices of urban neighbourhoods and diasporic communities, of the phenomenological experience of glocal communication media and the connected lifeworlds of extended family networks that traverse time, space and culture [11]. Many professionals and para-professionals also tend to inhabit intellectual communities of interstitial spaces where transdisciplinarity, inter professional working and multi agency activity is an ideological given but where lifelong learning and education for sustainable development still needs to secure a greater purchase.

As the libertarian thinker Ivan Illich remarked forty years ago learning may take place more effectively and more democratically without the hierarchical power structures and restrictive practices that currently dominate formal education. Illich ([12], p. 86) writes of lifelong, lifewide and city wide learning where the market for educational opportunity would be far more various if only “the goals of learning were no longer dominated by schools and schoolteachers”. Indeed, this is quickly happening as new digital media redefines the ecologies of lifelong learning. That the cyber environment could be a liberating force is not a new idea and neither is it one that has yet been realised as the current cultural/digital revolution is likely to be forever in the process of becoming. But what the present moment suggests is that change and continuity are never just two sides of the same coin for one technology simply does not replace another just as neoliberal economics necessarily relies on a strong state and the economy as a whole relies on healthy environmental and eco system services. The human social world may be viewed as a set of interlocking or nested systems but this does not deny the crucial significance of human agency. Nothing will come of nothing so the emergence of sustainable communities, urban regeneration and design, the development and application of low carbon environmental technologies can only arise from a network of learning webs, political and economic relations and structures, that draw on the resources, intelligences, skills and capabilities of institutions and organisations, groups and individuals that offer due recognition to being part of, rather than separate from nature. These webs need to be facilitative open spaces where knowledge exchange, collaboration and co-operation generates innovation, creativity, leadership and pragmatic sense of the possible. The present moment is consequently both an end in-itself and a means to a better tomorrow in which leadership is distributed, networked and fluid. The keys to a sustainable future depend on nurturing capabilities, social and environmental justice rather than the accumulation of skills [13]. To effect this, sustainability educators, learners and other practitioners must perceive themselves as cultural workers crossing borders and continually remembering that “intellectual leadership (...) depend[s] on superior intellectual discipline and imagination and the willingness to associate with others in their exercise” ([12], p. 101).

### 3. A Creative Rupture

For many decades the curriculum trajectory of formal education institutions at all levels in the ‘developed world’ has increased the salience of vocation and professional learning through the structuring learning that directly serves the needs of the economy and, in turn, promotes excessive material consumption. As Illich wrote ([12], p. 46), “in a schooled world the road to happiness is paved with a consumer’s index”. This, together with his stress on deinstitutionalisation and deprofessionalisation of learning resonates with the need for a sustainability learning to politically abrade the cultural authority of neo liberal perspectives on education and learning. The capitalisation metaphor—human capital, financial capital, social capital economic capital, cultural capital, natural capital—dominates many discourses including those that shape with operations of formal education and the public pedagogy of a number of sustainability organisations, such as Forum for the Future, and although arguably the capital metaphor may in some instances be a useful heuristic device, Darlene Clover [14] and Chet Bowers [15-17] remind us that metaphors, particularly root metaphors, shape not only how we perceive and live but also the ways in which we may critique and penetrate the political

implications and educational infractions of this conceptual framework. A shopping mall is both a constellation of capitals, good or bad, and a pedagogical opportunity that could conceivably nurture a transformation of meaning schemes and perspectives if set within learning processes and spaces of creative re-imagination, resistance and rupture. Similarly, in the sphere of training and vocational education the terms ‘work ready’ ‘employable’, ‘employer led’ and ‘relevant’ too easily trip off the tongue because mainstream policy makers and educators have internalised the complacent rhetoric of the end of history with “the only show in town” being private enterprise and economic growth. There is an alternative. There has to be one.

Given this, it is important that sustainability educators and practitioners recognise that formal education has historically been not so much a transformative experience but a socially reproductive one that rarely transforms base metal into gold doing little to turn an unsustainable into a sustainable world. Educators need to confront the routine behaviours, expectations, thinking and metaphors that has conceivably made our era an age of stupid. In this context, Franny Armstrong’s apocalyptic docudrama, *The Age of Stupid* (UK, 2009), is an important pedagogic space inviting a meditation on human nature and its financial, production and social relations. It is also an object lesson and potentially prefiguring an engaged and active political, media based, public pedagogy challenging fatalistic passivity and the infantisation of opinion. As Felix Guattari writes ([18], pp. 41-42).

The increasing deterioration of human relations with the *socius*, the psyche and ‘nature’, is due not only to environmental and objective pollution but is also the result of a certain incomprehension and fatalistic passivity towards these issues as a whole, among both individuals and governments. (...) It is quite wrong to make a distinction between action on the psyche, the *socius* and the environment. Refusal to face up to the erosion of these three areas, as the media would have us do, verges on the strategic infantilization of opinion and a destructive neutralization of democracy. We need to ‘kick the habit’ of seductive discourse, particularly the ‘fix’ of television, in order to be able apprehend the world through the interchangeable lenses or points of view of the three ecologies.

With a move towards deinstitutionalising formal learning and the rearticulation of public pedagogies through the cultural spaces and opportunities of co-operation, co-production, social and eco-entrepreneurship, lifelong learning practices need not be exclusively tied to the dictates of global capitalism that otherwise infuse our everyday lives and lifeworlds. There are new, clear and evident conditions of an alternative possibility for the experience of contemporary cultural capitalism is itself contradictory. Large multinational conglomerates and retail chains present themselves as ecologically responsible inviting consumers to buy into fundamental inequities through the false promise that our purchases will benefit those who suffer as a result of those very relations of production that have made the commodity possible. Five pence of every purchase goes to save a rainforest, feed a starving child, help a peasant farmer or save a tiger ... A consequence, Zizek writes ([19], p. 98) is that seemingly:

One can sincerely fight to preserve the environment, defend a broader notion of intellectual property, or oppose the copyrighting of genes, without ever confronting the antagonism between the Included and Excluded.

Hardt and Negri [20] suggests, in their analysis of the new Empire, the current world order is one where compromise and accommodation falls far short of the radical, structural and philosophic requirement to resist its cultural seductiveness. Resistance requires an imagination and a will to be against. A tall order maybe, but Empire's considerable impact suggests there is an intellectual appetite for political change that sustainability educators and practitioners and educators need to address. Again, with Mike Hulme's [21] approach to understanding the nature of climate change as so brilliantly laid out in *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, sustainability practitioners and educators have prime opportunities to square the circle, to reconcile sustainability with development, to both unbind politics and become a subject of and for politics. As the philosopher Alain Badiou ([22], p. 24) writes:

The essence of politics is not the plurality of opinions. It is the prescription of a possibility in rupture with what exists.

Climate change is not a problem waiting for a solution. The environment is not just waiting for a new and more appropriate form of fungible capitalisation but learners are waiting for possibilities of a new learning that only broad based and grounded sustainability networks can provide. These networks must be “readily available to the public and designed to spread equal opportunity for learning and teaching” ([12], p. 79). To effect this, a radical departure in current educational thinking and practice needs to be intimately and reflexively connected in a recursive succession of moments that bring forth a triadic process of reflective intuition encompassing mind, matter and mediation [23,24]. For Bergson, the moment of creativity emerges from a process of rupture, of discontinuity that transcends the quantitative discontinuities produced by dividing the world into separate and discrete segments, disciplines and professions but which are nonetheless infused with a plurality of continuities and rhythmic durations. These ruptures will gain strength from a rearticulation and re-apprehension of metaphor based on intuitive reflections of lived experience that imbue action with meaning and meaning with action. For Badiou [22], in our world where dialogue is reduced to a plurality of opinions and where democratic individuals seem largely indifferent to injustice and vast material inequalities, only through an “event”, a radical break or rupture with the status quo, can individuals regain their subjectivity and fashion a praxis that offers a genuine alternative. Networks of learning that can engage a multiplicity of participants, individuals, groups, organisations and sectors that may, or may not at first glance, share a great deal of common ground are nonetheless constitutive parts of a world of social learning enabling processes, spaces and practices of lifelong learning for sustainability to emerge. Thus instead resembling sites of social and cultural reproduction, such a lifelong learning, and its constituent networks, must become an ecotone which is understood and lived both metaphorically and literally. To put it another way, a lifelong learning perceived and practiced as an ecotone is a transition area where different communities of practice, and interest, may come together thereby generating a richness in thought, action, knowledge, skills, understanding, creativity and philosophy not found within any one section, group, institution or community or in the wider educational environment. This transitional space offers the potentiality and possibility of rupture and a new ground for sustainability learning that is in essence politically democratic and just. It is the cultural space for a critical, border pedagogy. For Illich ([12], p. 78) learning is a human activity which least needs manipulation by others. The most important learning is immeasurable re-creation and a good education system therefore should have three main purposes, ...it should provide all who want to

learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known.

This new form of education and learning, he writes ([12], p. 80), should not start with the question “What should someone learn?” but with the question, What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?” He outlines his proposal for a qualitative and quantitative transformation—a deschooling of society that challenges the hegemony of professional education and the ideology of credentialism tied completely to the economicistic worldview. He prefers the term “opportunity web” to “network” for the latter is too often enlisted “to designate the channels reserved to material selected by others for indoctrination, instruction, and entertainment” ([12], p. 79). He explains further ([12], p. 80),

Someone who wants to learn knows that he needs both information and critical response to its use from somebody else. Information can be stored in things and in persons. In a good educational system access to things ought to be available at the sole bidding of the learner, while access to informants requires, in addition, others’ consent. Criticism can also come from two directions: from peers or from elders, that is, from fellow learners whose immediate interests match mine, or from those who will grant me a share in their superior experience. Peers can be colleagues with whom to raise a question, companions for playful and enjoyable (or arduous) reading or walking, challengers at any type of game. Elders can be consultants on which skill to learn, which method to use, what company to seek at a given moment. They can be guides to the right questions to be raised among peers and to the deficiency of the answers they arrive at. Most of these resources are plentiful. But they are neither conventionally perceived as educational resources, nor is access to them for learning purposes easy, especially for the poor. We must conceive of new relational structures which are deliberately set up to facilitate access to these resources for the use of anybody who is motivated to seek them for his education. Administrative, technological, and especially legal arrangements are required to set up such web-like structures.

The media theorist and cultural guru Marshall McLuhan [25] once remarked, that we look at the present through a rear-view mirror and we march backwards into the future—“our educational system is totally rearview mirror”. Illich offers us a glimpse of the future that never happened, a utopia, a good place, that we have yet to find or more appropriately create. Fortunately, things are finally changing and there are clearer possibilities for looking ahead. Hopefully, Aston’s University’s Lifelong Learning Consortium for Sustainable Communities will help.

#### **4. Aston University’s Lifelong Learning Network Consortium: Sustainable Communities, Urban Regeneration and Environmental Technologies**

The Lifelong Learning Network for Sustainable Communities, Urban Regeneration and Environmental Technologies led by Aston University in Birmingham (UK) is attempting to re-imagine and create this new approach to learning for sustainability and extra mural university education. The Network offers both vertical and lateral progression within the existing structures and frameworks of formally accredited learning without denying opportunities for significant informal and non formal

learning in a wide array of spaces and lifeworlds that recognises learning as an element of what it means to *be* human. A sustainable learning environment needs to draw on all the resources, cultures and histories existing in the city-region including those diasporic communities that have become significant in promoting development in poor countries. Participation in global-local networks enable quick access to and transfers of human and financial resources, neighbourhood focussed community development through mentoring, capacity building through language learning, and eco and social entrepreneurship often harnessing a religious faith to fashioning a practice of sustainable wellbeing. These communities, by their nature, lend a global and development perspective to this an otherwise urban and locally based initiative sustainability learning. Interestingly, this initiative also gains some official legitimacy from the UK Government's 2009 white paper, *The Learning Revolution*, which rearticulated various ideas and approaches to lifelong learning through its emphasis on informal learning, co-operation, cultural space and the need to create of webs of learning opportunity outside and maybe tangential to mainstream formal education and training. Indeed, the White Paper endorsed the social value of "open space" as a means of empowering groups and individuals ([26], p. 7),

We want a broad choice of learning options to be available, including traditional classes, activities in museums, libraries and other settings, as well as opportunities to learn online. Self-organised learning is an important part of the mix. Many people are already doing this. We want to empower more people to organise themselves to learn, with opportunities designed by communities for communities. But we know that starting a group can be difficult: it can be particularly hard to find low cost space locally, and people need more expertise and tips on how to build a successful learning group.

The intimation here is that what was once known as extra mural learning within the university sector could be re-formed as an enabler, animateur, co-ordinator and centrifugal force of educative endeavour. Consequently, with development funding secured from two government QUANGOs (Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations), the Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull Lifelong Learning Network and the West Midlands Business Operations project [27]. Aston University's new Lifelong Learning Centre established during the first part of 2010 a Lifelong Learning Network Consortium comprising of private, public and third sector organisations, groups and interested citizens. Consortium members include power companies, private consultancies, further education and sixth form colleges, professional associations, community groups, NGOs and charities whose knowledge, mission and expertise fall within the broad public purpose of promoting a green knowledge based, low-carbon economy. In the spring and summer of 2010 a number of Consortium members were engaged to design and develop new modules for university accreditation together with a growing portfolio of complementary non accredited learning opportunities particularly in learning methods and facilitation. Some existing learning programmes owned and previously developed by some Consortium members have been recognised, endorsed and/or accredited allowing them to carry and transfer higher education credit within the national qualification framework and add a further dimension to the Network's operation. The Lifelong Learning Centre has transferred funding to some partners to develop learning materials because their knowledge, skills and values are not be readily found within the academy. These groups and individuals are at the forefront of their respective fields, are practically engaged in fashioning sustainable practices and opportunities and work directly and

immediately with business, community and local government. Intellectual property rights (IPR) remain with the lead body if the Aston University has funded the materials' development but with provision for the developer to deliver and further refine the material over a number iterations if undertaken from within the Consortium's operational parameters. In some instances the IPR for some module learning materials are shared jointly. By the autumn of 2001 the newly accredited learning opportunities included a wide range of ten and twenty credit modules, largely at level four, with self explanatory titles including: Strategies for Local Food, Planning for Sustainable Energy and Carbon Reduction, Concepts and Issues in Sustainable Development, Low Carbon Project Management, Setting Up and Running a Social Enterprise, Sustainable Design Strategies, Engaging Communities in Climate Change, Sustainable Cities, Sustainable Built Environment, Environmental Auditing, Intelligent Sustainability and Transition, Technology and Sustainable Life, Independent Professional Practice. The intention is to develop more if and when the Consortium generates the necessary interest, demand and momentum that will be the necessary corollary of a creative politico-educative event or rupture.

Delivery is by conventional face to face means, blended and in some cases purely on line at a distance. Much of the face to face delivery occurs outside the university's campus boundaries in business premises, in neighbourhood groups, in public facilities devoted to social learning such as those provided by the library services and increasingly integrated with the learning affordances of new media technologies and applications. Thus through offering these part time and flexible opportunities the Lifelong Learning Centre has attempted to empower a connected collective of sustainability practitioners, educators, activists and entrepreneurs through a framework and space for sharing and development. The learning opportunities for sustainability are offered at a standardised fee to all citizens within the city of Birmingham, and beyond, who are capable of benefiting and succeeding at these higher level study. Marketing and promotion takes place through a variety means with the most effective being social networking activities from which Consortium members have organised information and guidance events or simply conveyed information to interested parties. Modules can be taken singly or in a cluster and credit may be accumulated to gain a higher level award qualification in Professional Development. Many adult learners have sought out these learning opportunities as part of their own personal and professional development but often to enhance their employability understandable in a region that is economically depressed. Many employers have expressed interest in fashioning learning programme that suits their own specific organisational and performance needs and this sometimes manifests itself in a demand for small units of credit (five) and a desire to negotiate learning outcomes. Thus, both award programme in Professional Development and for the independent Professional Practice modules intended learning outcomes may be identified by the learner him/herself in dialogue with the tutor and employing or professional body (if there is one). These outcomes may be expressive rather than strictly prescriptive further enabling creative development and refinement within the learning process. Space for radical innovation and challenge is therefore built into this emerging topography of work related professional learning and development for sustainability. In certain cases, non certificated, experiential, learning is recognised and/or accredited thus acknowledging the value of informal and non formal learning Illich saw as so extremely important. As he wrote, "most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction" ([12], p. 20).

The form and content of this Consortium provision articulates a public pedagogy which expresses an intermodal, interprofessional, intercultural and transdisciplinary perspective on sustainability and learning that mirrors the Mode 2 knowledge creation processes discussed by Gibbons *et al.* [28] in their important text *The New Production of Knowledge*. The Consortium, therefore, may be viewed as a educative and communication medium for sustainability and, given the fast changing nature of our social, economic and ecological environments, this medium is perhaps the dominant message for through its very existence and practice it articulates an inclusive political intervention that supports ‘the right to the city’ [29,30] by putting into place a structure overdetermined as much by sustainability than purely economic imperatives. As Harvey writes ([31], p. 23),

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is (...) one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

Although the Aston University’s Lifelong Learning Centre retains an important role in quality assurance and enhancement of the learning on offer but its approach takes due cognizance of the power, significance and necessity of fostering connectivity, co-operation and collaboration. An ethics of social equality and environmental justice is at play for to do otherwise would be to reproduce a tunnel vision and unnecessary hierarchy individual learners, private companies and other institutions can no longer afford to countenance. Learning, creativity and innovation for sustainability require an open space of sharing and engagement. To put it another way, as Illich ([12], p. 89) wrote, “a truly public kind of ownership might begin to emerge if private or corporate control over the educational aspect of ‘things’ were brought to the vanishing point.” And this vanishing point can only be reached through choosing to think politically, act differently and by engaging in an active learning project that is married to informed, reasoned, emotionally sound and ethical changes in conduct and behaviour in all areas of social and working life. This means, in effect, the Lifelong Learning Consortium Network for Sustainable Communities is positing ethics as central to its work through performing a political vision of a sustainable future by breaking down and crossing disciplinary boundaries and by creating new spaces in which knowledge can be produced, critiques offered and transformative possibilities realised. In doing so, it invokes and refashions the Epimetheus myth presciently referenced at the end Ivan Illich’s Deschooling Society and implicitly explored in Paul Seabright’s [32] book on social trust and relationships, *The Company of Strangers*. The Lifelong Learning Consortium is inviting sustainability educators and other practitioners to enunciate a phenomenological understanding of human co-dependency and the values of sharing, caring, meeting, dwelling and loving. It also articulates a theory of practice that positions educators and cultural workers as transformative intellectuals and “militants” understood in Badiou’s sense of fashioning a new subjectivity through the learning intervention. Following Giroux ([33], p.79) these cultural workers and educators will need to, in and over time, develop a non totalizing politics that makes them attentive to the partial, specific, contexts

of differentiated communities and forms of power. This is not a call to ignore larger theoretical and relational narratives, but to deepen power of analyses by making clear the specificity of contexts in which power is operationalized, domination expresses itself, and resistance works in multiple and productive ways. The possibility of, and potential for, a form of creative destruction that leads to intellectual, social and cultural innovation will depend on an emergent subjectivity that stays true to the event, and follows through with a radical trajectory of both imagining and realising a logic of practice that structures new subjective but non-individual experiences, dispositions, proclivities, relationships, ideas, common schemes of perception and conception with potentialities for alternative power blocs, political actions and habitus [34]. One emergent practice would see the development of an epistemic reflexivity that rearticulates the scholastic/academic point of view that presently apprehends the social world as a puzzle to be observed, often in abstraction, to one that embraces and resolves the rather messy, contradictory, assemblage of practical tasks and problems that are consequent upon us living and being in the exploitative, networked empire of global capitalism [35,36].

For example, in curriculum terms, if learners are invited to explore the reasons for, benefits of and possibilities surrounding the growing, distributing and consuming of locally produced (organic) food a critique of mass produced food, the supermarket system, global distribution networks, pesticide use and, potentially, biotechnologies and genetic modification become implicit and explicit categories for thought and action. Such learning constitutes both a resistance, and a rupture, and as Badiou notes rupture follows resistance. Although these issues are presented for debate and discussion informing the ethic of such a learning opportunity is a view of an alternative to everyday routines of consumption, common sense opinion and of simply not thinking. “Not to resist is not to think. Not to think is not to risk risking” ([22], p. 8). And these risks, these thoughts, immanent to the infinity of a situation need to be aligned with a conception of learning as a “truth procedure”, a politics where deliberation about the possible is constitutive of the learning process itself [22]. Again, continuing with the theme of consumption a case study on palm oil production and the activities of many of those corporations embracing the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) production necessitates a close scrutiny of the activities corporations embracing, and of the WWF in promoting, the RSPO. The Indonesian rain forests are continually felled (often illegally), biodiversity continually destroyed and the orang u tan increasingly exterminated. Such a state of affairs has even been recorded in the Guinness Book of Records and such a case study requires active learning to push the term ‘sustainable’ beyond the public space of opinion and a dialogue of values into a realm that confronts and transcends the plurality of glib accommodation and the seeing of both sides [37] (Greenpeace International, 2007). The issue is not whether industrial practices can be modernized ecologically, and sustainably, but whether given the dynamic of global capitalism, the very notion of sustainable palm oil production is simply an ideological deception reinforcing the economic power of big corporations and the cultural hegemony of consumerism with a human face. Both these topics are addressed in various parts of the Consortium provision. It is important for sustainability educators to speak truth to power.

## 5. Conclusions

At the time of writing the Consortium is still in its early stages of development. The lead institution, Aston University, through its Lifelong Learning Centre, has taken a radical and progressive lead role

in this reinvention of extra mural university learning for sustainability. Whether the development succeeds or not will depend on a number of factors but it is clear that sustainability is becoming an increasingly prominent part of the educational and other practices of higher education institutions and other sectors of society. It has to. The Consortium and perhaps university sustainability education in general is perhaps yet another contradiction of capitalism or at the very least a parallax view [38] requiring a form of dialectical transcendence. Certainly accreditation is something Illich would be very wary of but without it development funding could not have been secured or support of other bodies enlisted. The funding, and accreditation, signifies a particular moment or political conjuncture whereby the State's specific political autonomy from dominant economic interests allowed a certain compromise or configuration of simultaneously radical and conservative educational possibilities to form [39]. There is also value in accrediting learning opportunities for designating learning as credit worthy is, on the part of the university, a public commitment to quality although as Illich ([12], p. 19) rightly argues, "neither learning nor justice is promoted by schooling because educators insist on packaging instruction with certification". The Consortium is above all a product of seeking to work in a radical manner within a conservative system where the tensions resulting from it offer possibilities of both success and failure. Success will lead to a reconfiguration of university led extra mural lifelong learning and failure could displace the political potential of sustainability as a means for deinstitutionalising higher education practice and for deschooling society. The last word remains with those of the inspiring Brazilian thinker Roberto Unger ([40], p.5) who in his 2006 Ralph Miliband Lecture argued that the idea of universal empowerment must be developed in to,

(...) a form of education, both original education and life long education, focus[ing] on the nurturing of a core of generic conceptual and practical capabilities. A form of education that is collective and intensive rather than encyclopaedic, that is analytical and problematic rather than informational, that is cooperative rather than authoritarian and individualist, and that is dialectical in spirit (...).

## References and notes

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