

SYMPOSIUM

New Worlds Rising? The View from Transdisciplinary Lifelong Learning

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The world will be very much what we make it – or, perhaps, make of it. Our approach to the places and spaces we live in has not been particularly caring. Knowledge and ignorance have combined in equal measure to generate short-term satisfactions and material improvement for some at the expense of many others, including those non-human animals who have not been party to progress, development, modernisation or hand-wringing sustainability. However, despite all the ideological obfuscations, academic calls for more research, and insistence on more growth or return to the old ontological verities, we – the human race – have little excuse to continue living our lives in the same ecologically profligate manner. There will always be a tomorrow, but not necessarily the one we will care for.

So, of the future we know certain things. We know that grand plans rarely turn out the way they were originally conceived or intended. We know that institutions of higher education have been complicit in fashioning unsustainability. We know that education and learning is, in principle, at least critical to identifying and nurturing new ways of living and being and we know that learning is not something that only takes place at one period of our lives, but is continuous throughout the life course. We also know, I think, that learning frequently oscillates between the formal, the non-formal and the informal and that intended outcomes are not necessarily the same as actual ones ... thank God. And if we think about it carefully, we also know that this education and learning cannot be purely rational or instrumental. It must be fluent, creative, changing and adaptable, fostering a dynamic but sympathetic relationship between people, place, work and sustainability. The university is an important part of the wider society – a generator of work, income, knowledge and purpose. It is learning as well as work that gives life meaning, which is why universities are crucial to everyone wherever they may be – in a rural village, in the inner city, young or old, rich or poor.

Education and lifelong learning is about action, or, more properly, conduct, which has at its core a sense of value and moral integrity that seeks to prepare the human-made environment for a new range of possibilities and capabilities, intentions, desires, impulses and judgements that will help craft the future. For the American philosopher John Dewey, our *ends-in-view* arise and function with action, and each action, each means, is an end en route to other ends which individuals may have to alter as actions are realized, or not. It is within the already crafted environment of physical infrastructures, spatial, ethnic and professional communities, big corporations and voluntary groups, political parties, pressure groups, social movements, towns and cities, faith-based organisations, the media (new and old), and schools, colleges and universities that human conduct is played out. In terms of practical (lifelong) learning for sustainability, this means more than buffing up the rhetoric of partnership, knowledge transfer and exchange, disciplinary specialisation, skills development and qualification frameworks. We need some other stars to steer

by, for in a complex and increasingly dangerous world transformation and transdisciplinary learning are keys to health, well-being and survival.

Transdisciplinarity refers to the articulation of otherwise discrete academic disciplines, professional expertise and local knowledge, real world imperatives with a reflective, creative and open apprehension of power relationships, risks and conditions of possibility emerging from uncertainty and complexity. It also offers a culture of learning and research that is cognizant of the multi-dimensionality of being human. Interesting, sustainability focused transdisciplinary work has already been undertaken in parts of the world (M'Gonigle & Starke, 2006; Holden et al, 2008; McWilliam, Hearn & Haseman, 2008). Universities have been greened, the learning city reinvented, the learning organisation refreshed, research re-orientated, project management processes redesigned and the purpose of lifelong learning as expressed in the 1996 Delors Report, *Learning: the treasure within* (Delors, 1996), rediscovered. Delors' four pillars of learning - namely, to do, to know, to be and to live together - inevitably invoke a transdisciplinary frame of reference which, as the physicist Basarab Nicolescu (1999, p. 7) argues, should be central to renewing the university and opening 'the way towards the integral education of the human being which necessarily transmits the quest for meaning'.

A practical real-world example of this transdisciplinary lifelong learning in action is a design charrette [1] - a participatory multi-stakeholder forum, often used in urban planning, and which can become a principal element of a sustainable community development or urban regeneration project in which local, academic and professional knowledge, experience, skills, expectations, desires and hopes are channelled via a collaborative process that values and supports dialogue, mediates conflict, inspires social learning and creates new individual and collective capabilities. Charrettes can, and do, take place anywhere - suburbs, inner cities, small towns or villages - and out of their highly organised and intense experience but sometimes superficially chaotic appearance, new places and glimpses of a desired and valued future are seen, communicated and acted on (Mega, 2000; Despres et al, 2004).

The charrette could perhaps prefigure the university's wider engagement with the social, economic and ecological environment. The University can no longer remain the ivory tower, nor for that matter the instrumental handmaiden of big government or the big corporations. Charrettes nurture skills, capabilities and visions that need to be both practical and pragmatic. Only with energy and ingenuity can a sustainable world develop, and only with imagination, direct engagement, cooperation and collaboration at a range of levels and scales can the university draw on the treasure within.

Note

[1] For more information on design charrettes, see <http://www.charretteinstitute.org/charrette.html>

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