'In Conversation' book launch event, 25th April 2024, UCL

With Justin Dillon and Stephen Sterling

Learning and Sustainability in a Dangerous World, Agenda Publishing
https://www.agendapub.com/page/detail/learning-and-sustainability-in-dangerous-times/?k=9781788216913

Some on-line participant sent in questions. Time did not allow them to be answered in the session, so Stephen has written some answers below.

On-line questions arising

- In terms of environmental education, is there any evidence that the UK Government has supported positive change/impact? What is the first priority (in terms of EE) for the new Government, as and when it arrives?

First question. I've been in this field for decades (as you might know). And support for government over the past thirty and more years has always been disappointing, in terms of policy and commitment. Having said that the Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy, and the https://www.reading.ac.uk/planet/climate-education/climate-education-plan including the Initial Teacher education framework look surprisingly good.
But there's maybe two issues here: one, this is so 'late in the day' – we needed this kind of policy work decades ago! Second, (experience has fed my scepticism), in practice the DfEE is very conservative, particularly in curriculum matters.

Second question: there is plenty of good thinking available about priorities – the next government needs to listen to young people and experts in this field, and tackle educational renewal with energy and imagination. Ideally, there would be a strategy for transformative change in educational policy and practice, as advocated by UNESCO. This has to include educating the educators. The agenda is not just about 'climate change education' by the way, but shifting the culture of education as a whole, as (I hope) my book makes clear.

- Very much enjoying this conversation - thank you!
  I'm a passionate degrowth advocate and would be interested to know your views on where (and if) degrowth ideas might usefully influence mainstream education in the UK to address Earth Crisis awareness and action…

This reminds me of the idea of 'Big History' (look it up) – that is how humans got to this critical juncture, and where the story might be going. If the whole 'business as usual' pattern is unsustainable, then pursuing it will lead to degrowth/post growth whether it is planned for or not. See for example Crownshaw et al's paper 'Over the Horizon' on this https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053019618820350
So this surely has potential for studies in history, economics, business, geography, science, ethics etc. This also raises the profound question of societal breakdown v breakthrough – the latter offering positive ways forward through the whole regeneration agenda/solutions etc.

- Universities are very difficult to change! Stephen mentioned that he'd like to be much more radical than he's allowed to be. Can Stephen suggest any good examples of true transformation in HE, or suggest some steps towards getting there?

No, I wasn't referring to myself, ratherI was quoting a conversation with a senior UNESCO person with responsibility for their education programmes. The question is huge, and I'm afraid I'm going to give a fairly brief answer .

You are right that universities are difficult to change. But how come they changed quite radically and adopted the neo-liberal view of education a couple of decades or so ago? If that's possible perhaps they really can change again –this time in response to contemporary crises, and the growing pressure from students and increasing numbers of academics. It's certain that much more is happening in the sector in the last two or so years, than happened over many years previously. Our 2021 e-book (Stewart, Hurth and Sterling) https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/14778/re-purposing-universities-for-sustainable-human-progress has had over 152k hits – which indicates to me a hunger for a positive response in HE. See also https://facultyforafuture.org/

Two other points: a university is not a monolith – it is made up of people, and groups of like-minded people can often effect surprisingly far-reaching change. Second – take a look at my website where I have updated the Links page. Increasing numbers of organisations and networks doing innovative and effective work – it's encouraging! https://sustainableeducation.co.uk/links/

Re 'steps towards getting there' – there are an increasing number of books coming out on this topic, but you might start with such sites as:

https://www.unep.org/resources/toolkits-manuals-and-guides/greening-universities-toolkit-v20

https://www.academia.edu/2296704/Turnaround_Leadership_for_ESD_in_Higher_Education

https://campus-transition.org/en/the-great-transition-handbook/

- What are your recommendations for educators, to go beyond the cognitive approach to teaching climate change?

Years ago, a colleague (David Hicks) wrote a paper showing that a cognitive approach alone made things worse for young people as regards affecting their mental health and doing nothing to empower them to engage in meaningful change.

There is a long history in progressive education of education of the 'whole person' of course – head, heart and hands – and loads of good practice to be inspired by. To my mind, this has to include outdoor learning, and developing a sense of place. The whole eco-anxiety thing has introduced a critical new(ish) dimension, and here working with sensitivity, particularly with young people, is so important. I have just written a foreword for a new book which brings these threads together https://www.hawthornpress.com/books/changemaking/social-ecology-change/earthwards/

but there is plenty of material out there on education regarding the emotional, affective, embodied, spiritual and practical aspects of learning.

- What do you feel is the role (if any) of psychotherapy at an individual level as a precondition for true transformative learning for sustainability? (A question from Bangkok, Thailand)

An interesting question. I guess it depends on how far the individual is in need. It might sound basic but a caring and loving education environment where the student feels valued and safe is surely fundamental and therapeutic in itself. And may well be essential to the likelihood of experiencing transformative learning.

- If we are to be radically transformative for the common good, what might be alternative qualifiers for success - what should we measure and how?

Well, Einstein (supposedly) said that 'not everything that matters can be measured'. I am very wary about measuring 'everything that moves' as it belongs to the culture we need to transcend. This is a culture of control, standardisation and homogenisation that has had a narrowing effect on the perception, conception and practice of education (more in my book on this).

However, here's a radical suggestion – how about 'happiness' as a measure? The degree to which learners are happy in themselves has a direct relationship to how far they will be open to supporting the common good - with openess, compassion, generosity, trust etc. All that said, I have been in touch recently with the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education (in the US) which is working on 'EfS Standards and Indicators' - which I think has merit. See https://cloudinstitute.org/cloud-efs-standards

- Liza here representing Wales…and founder of an education enterprise (Cymbrogi) that is already working with secondary schools already on this topic…at a systems level - starting with teachers and including wider community and business. Thanks to a (new) curriculum that allows us to actually 'teach the future'. (rooted in Wales' Wellbeing of Future Generations Act) Views on this curriculum and its transferability to English school system here?

To be honest, I don't know a great deal about it but I do know that the Future Generations Act which Jane Davidson pioneered is an excellent initiative and exemplar for other countries to follow. In the last decade or so both Wales and Scotland have been ahead of England on environmental and sustainability education policy. I think it's going to take a new government in Westminster for that to change. But good luck – it sounds like great work you are doing (I had a look at your site – thanks).

- Do we benefit in any way from having boundaries? Or should we be thinking about doing away with them completely?

Depends what boundaries you are referring to – subjects, departments, or perceptual maybe? I think it starts with the latter (i.e. perceptual) and what Gregory Bateson referred to as our 'epistemological error' iin primarily seeing the world in terms of separation rather than relation (lots in my book on this!). I am reminded of the Brundtland Report (1987) (which of course popularised the concept of sustainable development). The report includes the line "An environmental crisis, a development crisis,

an energy crisis – they are all one'... An understanding that our labels – and the boundaries we use in association with these labels – can obscure relationships and dynamics in phenomena.

It is fine – and necessary – to make distinctions (which is fundamental to reductionism), but the error is to go from 'distinction' to 'dissociation' – that is make the assumption that phenomenon have no relationship. This is really problematic when we are faced with complexity and the need for multiple perspectives. Which is why inter- and trans- disciplinarity is so important. As for single disciplines, they need to regarded and practised with 'permeable' and soft boundaries. Systems thinking and systemic approaches are fundamental to addressing these issues. My Linking Thinking material on systems thinking – quite old but still very relevant – includes teaching activities on boundaries and perception.
http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/linkingthinking.pdf

- I wonder if Steven might speak to the shift of focus in some recent "climate activist" campaigns towards confronting our cultural institutions' 'complicity in evil': ie their complicity with an omnicidal cultural system that has for over thirty years shown itself impervious to more and better information about ecological sustainability - if acting on this information conflicts with its primary allegiance to economic growth and short term vested interest. It's notable to see how for a growing number student activists its this framing which enables them to break free of cynicism, passivity and depression before the overwhelming scale of the crisis upon their generation.

This shift towards activism is a phenomenon of our times, and significant if seen in a historical context. It is of course a response to what young people see as a failure of the mainstream whether that be political or educational, together with fear of the future. There are two aspects: 'anti' and 'pro', that is, critiquing and confronting business-as-usual interests and entrenchment, and secondly, exploring and building positive alternatives. What should be the role of education in this dynamic?

I think deep inquiry into the state of things (see for example 'Transformational inquiry questions' under 'Key Ideas' on my website) may well lead students to want to campaign, but I think educators need to think carefully about encouraging campaigning without such thorough inquiry and critical reflection. The 'pro' pathway – particularly engaging with regeneration agenda at local level – is less contentious and is of proven benefit to the mental health, abilities and wellbeing of young people. I believe this pathway can change fear and anger towards active hope and resilience.

- Drawn from your experience, what practical steps would you recommend to encourage senior leaders in a University to support a whole institutional approach to sustainable education?

This reminds me of the old line about 'what keeps senior management awake at night'. Well, it's probably the university's ranking, reputation, finance, student and staff recruitment and retention, and so on. So as a 'change agent' you need to hit these buttons. The sustainability agenda is never going to get far if it's seen as a limited interest area, and marginal to the 'real business' of the university. There's plenty of evidence (particularly from the NUS/SoS), that students consistently want their universities to do more on this agenda both in terms of research and teaching, but also as regards ethos, campus management, investment etc. So this is key because of student funding. Then there is sustainability as a way towards raising profile and reputation - eg through Green Gown Awards, Times Higher Award, People and Planet league tables. Draw on exemplars from those universities nationallly and internationally that have excelled through a whole institutional approach. Another point: all universities have some strap lines around their civic responsibility, and about

preparing people to be effective and responsible citizens in an uncertain world – or similar. Make the argument strongly and convincingly that this is not possible without embracing the sustainability agenda. Lastly, look at Donella Meadows' perennially relevant work such as https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/. Ensuring sustainability is the basis of at least one of the university's publically owned purposes is a very powerful lever for change. See https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/14778/re-purposing-universities-for-sustainable-human-progress and particularly Iain Stewart and Victoria Hurth's paper on this theme. Lastly, be persistent!

- Thanks Stephen, it's telling that your formative experiences didn't mention school; unsurprising becasue any publicly funded education surely reflects its society - so have you come across - or do you envisage - ways of developing a more iterative relationship between school and society as a means of changing education?

Well, primary school in particular was formative and positive for me. But things were different all those years ago, and much less controlled. A quick answer to the question - have a look at Kumar and Howarth (2022) https://www.waterstones.com/book/regenerative-learning/satish-kumar/9781913738464
I have a couple of pieces in there but quite apart from them, there are some very nice and inspirational stories of good practice. But also keep an eye on Sustainability and Environmental Education https://se-ed.org.uk/ and the https://naee.org.uk/.
Internationally, see https://www.unesco.org/en/green-citizens, and https://www.unesco.org/en/prizes/education-sustainable-development/laureates

Professor Stephen Sterling

3rd May 2024

https://sustainableeducation.co.uk/