

THE POLITICS OF LEARNING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

This article explores a number of perspectives on the politics of learning and sustainable development, examining both what these reveal, and what they do not. On the basis of this exploration, the article examines what it seems safe to say about politics, learning and sustainable development and what cannot – with certainty – be known. Finally, the principle problem in any such exploration is addressed, which is that all observers are themselves inextricably part of the issues they are seeking to describe: it cannot be otherwise as what external observation point would be possible for such a study? The article argues that commentators on the politics of learning and sustainable development are themselves, whether they like it or not, political, and sustainable development actors with something to learn. The authors note that people tend in their thinking towards a notion of internally-consistent sets of opposing ideas, which are likely to be held or promoted, by individuals or organisations, in a consistent and predictable way. Whilst cases are often made for ‘balance’ between worldviews in relation to learning and/or in relation to sustainable development, it is argued here that such ways of thinking are essentially conservative, and lead us to repeat the same debate over and over again. The

article concludes that sustainable development requires that humanity learns to re-think its ways of thinking and learning about politics.

1. Introduction

The title of this article sounds straightforward enough. One might suppose that there exists a single, clearly defined area of political debate relating to the inter-relationships between ‘learning’ on the one hand and ‘sustainable development’ on the other. Unfortunately, this is not so. On the contrary, ‘politics’, ‘learning’ and ‘sustainable development’ are the foci of quite separate self-contained debates, each conducted in its own right and on its own terms, with each fragmented into a large number of sub-issues which are also hotly contested. All the elements of all these debates can be combined together in a multitude of ways, creating a kaleidoscope of controversies. Worse still, many substantive elements of these debates involve appeals to natural or social-scientific knowledge bases that are themselves uncertain and contested.

The following ‘dark object – dark space’ metaphor may be found useful as a way of thinking about the task of this article, and the approach taken in it. Firstly, think of the topic as a very large and irregular-shaped object, which is completely black and located in the centre of a large space from which all light has been excluded. The task is to describe this object in detail. In principle, at least, the task is not impossible; that is, by adopting this metaphor there is an assumption that the object of enquiry does have a shape, ie, that the politics of learning and sustainable development do have substance, and that the task at hand is therefore not impossible.

However, to pursue the metaphor, the only equipment provided to do this job is a pencil- beam torch. Standing at a point adjacent to the object and shining this torch onto it, the information obtained is valid: but it is far from adequate. Standing at a sequence of different points to shine the torch, in each case something different is seen. Laboriously, a picture will emerge, though this is likely to be subject to frequent error and correction. All points of view will be useful, though some will appear to contradict each other in ways that are difficult to resolve. It will be most important to avoid excluding particular points of view, or to leap to general conclusions from the information yielded by only one or two perspectives, no matter how appealing or persuasive these may seem to be.

In the remainder of this article several perspectives that have been taken on the topic at hand will be explored, looking, if you will, along the thin beams of light that have shown particular places and asking both what they reveal, and what they do not. Of course, these beams often intersect, and sometimes fall on the same surfaces from different angles – one would not expect anything else. It is then further asked, what, on the basis of the examination, seems safe to say about politics, learning and sustainable development and, perhaps more importantly, what cannot – with certainty – be known. Finally, and in developing a conclusion, the principle flaw in the ‘dark object – dark space’ metaphor is addressed, which is that all observers with their pencil-beam torches are themselves inextricably part of the mysterious object they are seeking to describe: it cannot be otherwise as what external observation point would be possible for such a study of politics, learning and sustainable development? It follows, inexorably, that

commentators on the politics of learning and sustainable development are themselves, whether they like it or not, political, and sustainable development actors with something to learn.

To conclude this introduction, something should be said on the question of definition. No doubt there will already be some academic readers who will find the authors' approach entirely illogical, unsatisfactory, or both, because it does not begin by defining terms. What is actually meant by 'politics', 'learning' and 'sustainable development?' they are likely to ask. However, it is essential to the authors' approach that this apparently logical initial step be avoided. When people define these key terms, either explicitly or implicitly, they are, in effect, choosing the vantage point from which their 'torch' will be shone on the object of study, thereby excluding other perspectives. To put it another way, they are beginning their enquiry not with data-collection but with analysis: they are delineating what is of interest, a priori. This is to be avoided, as far as, and for as long as, it is possible for any human observer to do so.

Below, the article begins with two contrasting perspectives, each of a general kind.

2. The technocratic perspective

The identification of a technocratic (or technocentric) approach to environmental issues, and the explication of its relationship to other strands of environmentalism, has been developed by several scholars over the past two decades. In particular, a 1989 paper by O'Riordan identifies, "a radical or manipulative perspective in which human ingenuity and the spirit of competition dictate the terms of morality and conduct." (p.82). In the extreme, this technocratic/technocentric view is one which depends upon a reductionist, mechanistic view of the natural world, and exhibits confidence in the ability of human beings to develop scientific and technological solutions to environmental problems as they emerge.

A more recent example of a technocratic approach to the environment and sustainable development argues for a view that divides sustainable development up into different kinds of 'sustainability', each of which can be assigned to particular kinds of experts. Hence, social scientists should develop human understanding of social sustainability, economists should be responsible for economic sustainability, and biophysical specialists should search for the secrets of environmental sustainability. The role of education, and therefore presumably the important notion of learning, is to develop human capital, thereby contributing to human sustainability both within nations and within a new global economic order. The technocratic view of human/environment relations has also been influential within the field of education through the research-based work of several scholars in the 1980s, particularly Hungerford and his associates. This body of work, which develops a research-based taxonomy of goals and processes for 'environmental education', has as its ultimate end the creation of an environmentally-aware and responsible citizenry. Another, more recent example of a technocratic view of human/environmental relations is 'education for sustainable development', as set out, for example, by Hopkins. In this effort, specific exercises are proposed to help communities to embrace general sustainability goals, reorient their education to address sustainability, and to manage change. Both views have been

influential on practice, the former approach primarily because of its secure foundation in research, and the latter approach because of its institutional standing within UNESCO and the Agenda 21 process.

These (and other) technocratic approaches have much to be said for them. Their instinctive appeal to science as a source of both knowledge and method is defensible even if science is implicated in causing many of the environmental and social problems now facing the world. As was pointed out over twenty years ago, it seems unthinkable that humanity should attempt to resolve current problems that it faces without an appeal to the science that enabled the technology that created those problems. For example, any approach to the problem of abandoned and decaying nuclear submarines seems literally and metaphorically doomed without appropriate scientific input. More generally, the fact that human ingenuity has sometimes led to problems seems a poor reason to abandon ingenuity, even if that choice were available. Finally, in relation to the specific educational examples given above, there is no doubt that positive educational outcomes have resulted from the intelligent use, by particular teachers in their particular contexts, of such approaches.

However, the politics of technocratic approaches to sustainable development and learning is only ever sketchily addressed, if it is addressed at all. The focus is on 'getting the job done', without much consideration of how 'the job' came to be defined in the particular way it is, or whose interests this definition might serve. Even this is not so much of a problem in cases where almost everyone would agree about the nature of the problem: safe decommissioning of nuclear reactors is in everyone's interests. But when 'education for sustainable development' implies a general emphasis on the 'environmentally-responsible citizen,' a number of questions should be asked, including the following:

- Is there certainty that countries, even Western ones with traditions of liberal democracy and freedom, are actually run by their citizens in any real operational sense?
- Is the role of 'citizen' the most important role people have in terms of the influence that roles have on what they do and think in relation to sustainable development? What about the roles of 'employee', 'employer', consumer, or 'parent' for example?
- What about the differential economic power enjoyed by citizens of different countries, or by different citizens within countries?
- What about those who are denied citizenship rights, for one reason or another, or have their freedom to enjoy them curtailed through political, cultural or linguistic influences?
- How closely correlated is 'what citizens learn', with 'what citizens are taught'?

Such questions help to transform the initial problem – that of bringing about learning which will promote sustainable development. This cannot, in the end, just be a

conceptually straightforward matter of acting on behalf of a common human interest to understand complex problems, and then to plan and implement ameliorative or remedial interventions. Some problems of an irresolvable nature, which may be characterised by conflicts of interest, competition for scarce resources, and opposed views coloured by incompatible but deeply-believed, historical-cultural, narratives, are to be expected. Thus, the technocratic view will not do, on its own. The pencil beam-torch needs to be shone from other angles as well.

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Biographical Sketches

Stephen Gough is Senior Lecturer in Education and a member of the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment at the University of Bath. He is currently researching the role of Real Options as a metaphor for promoting environmental learning as part of a project funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He has extensive experience of research in environmental and sustainability education around the world. He is a member of the International Editorial Board of the *Journal Environmental Education Research*.

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Their latest books are:

Scott WAH & Gough SR (2003) *Sustainable Development and Learning: framing the issues*, London/New York: RoutledgeFalmer and

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