

SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION: IMPERATIVES FOR A VIABLE FUTURE

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Summary

Globalization is affecting all areas of human activity. Education is no exception. Despite the obvious problems posed by Globalization driven by Western capitalist values, it is equally rich in potential for regional and cultural renewal as the nascent global community seeks self-definition at both the local and global levels of the world system.

Sustainable educational practices offer us the intellectual and organizational structures to develop learning cultures that are sensitive to both the micro levels of learning as represented in the individual and local needs of peoples, and at the meta level of human development in which the broad sweep of human evolution is found to carry fundamental lessons for how we structure and define educational priorities. In rethinking educational processes a Neo-humanist approach is offered that links sustainable socioeconomics, broad community involvement, and partnership models of learning with a sustainable vision of human development based on a layered description of human needs that include the physical, intellectual, ethical, emotional and spiritual.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of globalization describes economic and political processes that are generating global networks. These are broaching political borders, blurring the distinction between public and private space, and leading to the formation of larger and more complex institutions. Economically the result, by and large, has been that the increased wealth produced by such developments has been consolidated in fewer hands. Politically we are witnessing the drive towards regional economic groupings such as that occurring in Europe and, though less defined, in the South-East Asian neighborhood. The vehicle for this process has been the new information technology. It is weaving a convincing web of communication around the world. It has no respect for boundaries and is giving rise to a new global and virtual culture.

Many, such as social critic Ziauddin Sardar, see globalism as a vehicle for cultural penetration and dominance by the West (see chapter *Global Science*). Certainly, as political analyst Gillian Youngs demonstrates, economic inequity is on the increase as a direct result of Globalization (see chapter *The Internet and Political Economy*). Others such as feminist futurist Ivana Milojevic discern within it the potential for “Global transformation based on human unity,” but warn, “Such potential is overshadowed by the negative aspects of the Globalization dynamic.” (See chapter *Globalization, Gender and World Futures*).

It is less often appreciated that education, and specifically the exportation of Western educational forms and values, is playing a significant role in the process of

Globalization. Cultures around the world are willingly submitting to western education in a bid to gain entry to the prosperity they associate with the culture it is designed to reproduce. They are unconcerned with, or unaware of, the mounting evidence of disfunctionality within this system. Stress is rampant in the working lives of both student and teacher while learning outcomes are still only patchy. Cultural critic Neil Postman points out that Western education has in practice lost sight of the broader goal of learning which was to introduce people to the deeper dimensions of life and community. Consumerism is the new world-view and is underpinned by a neo-liberal mindset such as that described with approval by Post-modern thinker Richard Rorty as, “Enlightened [and] secular through and through.” This in turn is paving the way for developments that could lead to the emergence of a knowledge economy in which the distinction between information and capital has been totally collapsed. Paradoxes abound as the forces behind globalism demand free access to all areas of human life while promoting regional diversity. Education is promoted as the way to access the benefits that Globalization has to offer yet critique of the educational system and the urge to dissent is met with massive fear. At the heart of this fear is the desire not to be excluded from the success that is perceived to be attached to educational initiation. It is in the disregard of globalism for convention however that we may be able to gain the leverage needed to develop and promote sustainable educational environments. With the arrival of information technology, though still in its infancy, choice now gains a whole new dimension of meaning when we seek to determine when, where and how we educate our children (see chapter *Navigating Globalization through Info-design, an Alternative Approach to Understanding Cyberculture*).

2. The Global Education Agenda

The global educational agenda, as the forces of capital drive it, is one that seeks to have schools throughout the world-producing students with the skills to be either leaders or followers in a global economy. Education functions as a primary agent of cultural reproduction. Such schools are inherently conservative and authoritarian and offer simple curriculums based on classical knowledge domains- language, mathematics, science and social science—that promote individual skill acquisition and growth while being augmented with courses promoting technological facility and traditional arts, sports and craft. Educational debate tends to focus on the deficiency of this model and to offer alternatives founded on Humanist visions of human potential.

While liberatory practices emerge from such humanist inspired activity little progress has in fact been made in rethinking education because humanism is deeply implicated in the global education agenda and Western imperialism. Sustainable educational practices are those, which foster both individual and collective awareness of human agency and responsibility and provide skills at both the personal and cultural levels to enact sustainable, life affirming practices at both the local and global levels. Such practices nurture individuals and their communities at the physical, intellectual, ethical, emotional and spiritual levels. They include a range of subjects that span the traditional subjects of education but include direct relationships with adults engaged in the world (trades, service provision, etc.) mentoring, environmental and social service, cultural engagement (theatre, music, art, etc.) and reflective practices such as silent times and meditation.

2.1. Globalism

Globalism is a development that is deeply paradoxical. It has the potential to generate tolerance and diversity on a global scale while offering the infrastructure to maintain peace and health on a scale never imagined before.

Yet it also offers the specter of cultural dominance and centralized wealth leading to greater inequalities and degradation of the global environment at both the physical and cultural levels. How this paradox is resolved depends on the extent to which a new and sustainable culture can emerge to displace the materialist capitalist culture that promotes individual over collective values and short term over long-term thinking.

One central force in this struggle towards the forging of a sustainable future is the way we educate our children. Historically educational systems are rooted in industrial modes of thinking. To shift to sustainable cultural practices we need to challenge this way of thinking and reinvent what it means to educate for sustainability by arriving at a new set of educational imperatives.

Imperative 1: We need to reinvent what it means to educate for sustainability.

2.2. Industrial Organization

The architects of the state education system that has become ubiquitous globally were inspired by the ideals of the industrial revolution and took it upon them to invent a system that was compatible with such a mode of organization. Managerialism was the dominant worldview that shaped educational priorities.

Neat efficient classrooms were designed to promote the efficient dissemination of knowledge. Such a system was seen as essential if illiterate and willful peasants were to be forged into skilled workers.

The liberal educational system that had formed the intellect behind the designers was seen as being too abstract and irrelevant to such a purpose so a simplified system based on the famous 3 R's (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) was formed. The tension between the humanist liberal education agenda and the utilitarian and vocational agenda was not squarely addressed and has been a source of ongoing dialogue, aggravation and renewal ever since.

The industrial model of education is characterized by:

- Hierarchy
- Authority and control
- Punitive discipline
- Ever expanding bureaucracy
- Outcome specificity
- Simplistic testing and limited thinking
- Non-reflective space
- Learning as ends oriented

2.3. Implications for Education

Such organizational structures are at the root of modernism and its global extension. They are both strong and coercive as they are well suited to the managerialist worldview, which allows forever increasing centralization and control. The utilitarian thread in schooling suggests that schools will:

- Become ever more complex and powerful
- Become hegemonic sources of intellectual capital
- Offer techno-fix responses to environmental stresses
- Use virtual technologies to foster individualism over relationships
- Continue to promote authoritarianism and pyramidal structures of organization
- Stream students for specific vocations
- Emphasize testing as a quality management and control vehicle
- Promote a “back to basics” view of learning

2.7. Humanism

The humanist threads in education are both richer and more complex. They are often antagonistic to utilitarian themes but in general lack the structural force to do more than soften utilitarian demands on the young, their families and their teachers.

Much educational rhetoric owes its form to the humanist tradition. As such the global educational agenda is becoming increasingly shaped by humanist ideals that are frequently oppositional to practice. Such a tension lays a fruitful foundation for educational change and creative ferment. Conservative humanism is however losing friends as it describes itself in terms of classical modes of learning and structuring information. Such a purist approach is perceived as being ill suited to the needs of the modern world in which traditional boundaries are ceasing to be relevant to the extraordinary explosion in knowledge and, to be more accurate, information.

Liberatory humanist practice still has considerable force and is well exemplified by the critical literacy work of Paulo Freire. Such educational practice is deliberately anti-institutional and has a clear political agenda aiming as it does at empowering those disadvantaged by dominant forms of knowledge and culture. Such practices are however piecemeal and lack any institutional base from which to redraw the educational map.

2.8. Implications for Education

Under the influence of humanism schools will display a patina of characteristics that promote environments which:

- Cultivate intellectual, primarily Socratic, vigor and curiosity and place a high value on individual excellence
- Are conservative being committed to Liberal educational traditions that hold to the historical academic divisions, promoting the cultural elitism attached to these

- Display the historic layering of the humanist tradition itself being a synthesis of Christian, Euro-centric, Enlightenment and Romantic world views that silence “the Other” (non-western and indigenous knowledge) and promote a homogenous self-referential monoculture
- Give expression to Romantic notions of the young that generate child centered learning environments of a more holistic nature
- Offer Democratic environments for learning in partnerships where students actively shape their own learning destinies and seek to free themselves from toxic power relations
- Commit staff and students to overtly political, ecological, and liberating agendas in which critical literacy is central to all learning processes

2.9. Unsustainability of Current Mode

Current educational patterns are unsustainable and unable to generate change from within due to the structural limitations imposed on them by the weight of their own history. Educational systems worldwide are under great stress as the information technology revolution is posing an array of challenges that the system was never designed to meet. The emergence of TIVO and a plethora of virtual learning pathways that offer personalized routes to accessing learning will challenge the system to its core. Essentially however this unsustainability lies in the cultural sphere where materialism, individualism and what educational critic and futurist Richard Slaughter calls the ‘flatland’ mentality leads to a business as usual approach to global problems that are demanding of us exceptional responses if we are to avoid extensive and irreversible degradation of our planetary environment.

2.7. Liberatory Education

At this point we reach the “frontier” of education. As individuals and groups flee mainstream educational options they find they have to chart new territories. A look at the statistics on American homeschoolers underscores this fact. Educational activist and spokesman Bill Ellis recently summarized the situation this way:

“In 1980 there were perhaps some 12 000 homeschoolers. From 1990 to 1998 homeschooling grew from 300 000 students to some 1.5 million. At this rate of growth, nearly 20% a year, the 1.5% of American children now homeschooled will grow to 24% in 10 years.”

Similar shifts, in which consumers vote with their feet, are also evident in other Western countries. This journey includes an exploration of learning, community, family, and relationship and, for many, spirituality. This is a place of risk taking and personal commitment, as people place themselves and their children on the line. There are dead ends and scoundrels galore but there are also great rewards as people come to recognize that there are greater possibilities to be had outside of the regular houses of learning.

Education, in a future that has successfully negotiated these waters, may or may not be located in schools, as we know them. However learning takes place, its main aim would be an extension of the humanist liberatory project, which seeks to free individuals, and

communities from narrow sentiments that cap human potential, and therefore happiness. Such an extension has been called by philosopher P. R. Sarkar neo-humanism or the new humanism (see chapter *Neo-humanism, Globalization, and World Futures*). In this development, which has at its root a radical shift from an episteme rooted in Greek empiricism and Enlightenment rationalism to a spiritually activated and meditative empiricism based on the Indian tradition of Tantra, we can see the emergence of a neo-humanistic project which carries the threads of:

- Liberatory consciousness gained through the exercise of a critical futures technique and a critically spiritual mentality
- Transformative practices that work on individuals and communities through engagement with service as the core of life long learning
- An ecological awareness gained through the identification of the self with the world we inhabit
- An ethical sensibility born of life affirming relationships that are free from commodification and conditionality
- An awareness that consciousness is subtle and to engage with ones' own consciousness is also to engage with others at a meta level where myth and dreaming become the constant backdrop to human activity
- An appreciation of layered knowing which accounts for learning as a non-linear and synthetic experience

This really is the “frontier” of a process of education, which is truly sustainable as we enter an age of global imperatives that will determine the quality of life for countless future generations.

3. Educational Culture

Wherever groups of people live and work together culture is present. It is the expression of our collective minds giving form to the hopes, aspirations, fears and beliefs that bind the community. Human culture is surprisingly homogenous focusing as it does on simple but essential drives such as the desire for happiness and security, a sense of mystery and a collective appreciation of belonging to a family—both at the level of intimate relationships and at the meta level of belonging to humanity itself. Educational culture is a particular structural expression for the dominant drives found in human culture. It includes the working culture of the schools and their staff as well as classroom culture, which is a learning culture.

3.1. Learning Culture

Learning cultures are like prisms into the soul of a community as they reflect the dominant values and attitudes of the society they are designed to reproduce. Such cultures are always layered, see the work of political scientist Sohail Inatayatullah on *Causal Layered Analysis*, in that they have overt goals such as the teaching of reading and writing. These can be measured empirically and are frequently used by government agencies to assess the efficacy of educational practice. There is also a more subjective and intangible layer where culture is about the acquisition of social skills usually relating to control of self and the imparting of values such as obedience to authority and

discipline. At this level educational discourse tends to focus on the break down of social control and values, much energy is put into generating environments that offer a trade off between social control and individual expression. At this level learning culture varies widely from school to school, reflecting school ethos, and from classroom to classroom, reflecting the personality and character of the teacher and his or her relationship with the students in the negotiation of microenvironments for learning culture. Beneath this layer there is the subconscious structures of culture relating to structures of power and beneath that too, layers of myth and metaphor that drive the primary creation of societal ideals and their manifestation in the lives of each one of us.

Thus we have four layers of cultural expression:

- Surface litany—skill acquisition
- Conscious value generation—negotiation of individual and collective needs
- Deep power structures—authority as shared or teacher driven or imposed on teacher and students
- Myth and metaphor generation of the ideational field that gives human action meaning

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Biographical Sketch

Marcus Bussey is a teacher and musician, and has written numerous articles and reviews on futures, futures education, holistic education, neo-humanist education, artistic practice, culture, history, Montessori education, and cognitive theory.