

CULTURAL LITERACY

understanding and respect for the cultural aspects of sustainability

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Culture includes our whole system of beliefs, values, attitudes, customs, institutions and social relations. The global crisis facing humanity is a reflection of this system and is therefore a cultural crisis (UNESCO 1997). Hawkes (2001) reasoned that culture is the fourth pillar of sustainability, the glue that holds the social, environmental and economic pillars steadfast. An important skill for dealing with cultural diversity is *cultural competence*, which Chrisman (2007:69) defines as 'attitudes, practice skills, and system savvy for cross cultural situations'. The central thrust of most cultural competence work involves individuals' flexibility and capability to properly assess and treat all people respectfully and in a suitable manner appropriate to their culture. *Cultural literacy* includes cultural competence but adds to it the ability to critically reflect on, and if necessary bring about change in, one's own culture. It also includes the ability to analyse the behaviours of dominant cultures in relation to other cultures, for instance, the impact of globalization or cross-cultural partnerships on local cultures around the world. There may, for example, be exploitative elements of sustainable development partnerships implemented by Western multi-national corporations in developing countries. Four key cultural literacy skills will be discussed in this chapter.

- Cross-cultural awareness
- Local cultural awareness
- Critical reflection and thinking
- Personal skills for coping with being change agent

Cross-cultural awareness

Within the enormous cultural diversity that exists on Earth there are cultures which manage to fulfil human needs from the local environment in ways which are sustainable, or at least, more sustainable than consumerism-based cultures. Cultural literacy therefore includes the ability to examine other cultures critically and gain ideas about sustainability from them. Learning about another culture can be as simple as using the internet, consulting academic literature or popular media. However, this can give a superficial understanding of another culture, a 'tourist gaze' where learning is inauthentic and artificial.

Rather than learning *about* other cultures, a deeper and more respectful learning for sustainability can be gained by 'paralleling' different cultural traditions, beliefs and social systems with the consumerist cultures of the West, and then utilising this learning as a tool for critical reflection on aspects of learner's own cultures as well as the paralleled cultures. *The word 'parallel' is used to provide a more egalitarian view of cultural examination than the value-laden 'comparison' which insinuates one may be more appropriate, successful, valuable than the other.*

Time spent understanding and 'paralleling' different cultural traditions can be extremely valuable when carrying out international sustainable development projects, both to avoid damage to the local culture and to draw on aspects of the culture which are already sustainable. One example of such a project is the co-operation between Ugandan local communities, Welsh Water and WaterAid (see Welsh Water 2009). In this partnership, the Ugandan communities continued their cultural outdoor lifestyles but worked with the external agencies to enhance sustainable living practices and increase the quality of life for communities in relation to health, education, environmental protection and conservation (Watkins 2009). Sustainable technologies from both Western and Ugandan cultures were combined with the sustainable local traditional lifestyles and environmental practices of the Ugandan culture to implement sustainable development. This project can be utilised as an example of a beneficial use of cultural literacy for sustainability as it does not use sustainable development for the sole purpose of increasing trade and growth for Western countries, but rather uses it to maintain local cultural and social sustainability.

Not all projects which come under the label of 'sustainable development' are beneficial to local cultures, however, and it is important for learners to view partnerships for sustainability between the West and developing countries as intervention (which could potentially be negative) rather than development (which has intrinsically positive connotations in the West). One exercise that can help raise awareness of how sustainable development can be tainted by economic values of market expansion is to involve students in critical analysis of how sustainable development is represented by transnational corporations. For instance, a recent Kenco Coffee advertisement claims that the company assists local communities in sustainable development through their trade with them. This image of sustainable development is imperialist, with Western style houses popping up out of rainforests, Western style classrooms (desks and blackboards) in the middle of a culture with an exceptionally good natural environment for learning outside the classroom, and water gushing out of a Western style irrigation system indicating that it is now possible to waste a valuable resource on a larger scale. The underlying message is that 'valuable', 'better' or 'progressive' development involves becoming more like the (unsustainable) societies of the West. Cultural literacy can help prepare learners to contribute to developing sustainable societies that reflect and maintain local cultural traditions rather than imposing dominant cultural values and social systems from the West.

Discussions of culture and sustainable development can lead on to topics such as race and sustainability, establishing a local sense of place and cultural identity, community versus individualistic cultural value systems, imperialist definitions of sustainability, neoliberalism and sustainable development, and the impact of globalisation on local cultures. There is a wide range of literature in cultural studies and cultural theory that provides well defined, explicated and useful information on these areas. Furthermore, protocols that provide guidelines for culturally appropriate behaviours that assist with cultural sensitivity, awareness and respect when working with local cultures are often developed by the government of the host nation itself (e.g., Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development 1999). These guidelines are extremely useful in coming to an understanding of the complexity of cultural issues and the importance of cultural literacy for sustainability.

Local cultural awareness

Cultural awareness and respect is not just a cross-cultural skill. The ability to accept and respect knowledge within local cultures and communities is also necessary for developing cultural literacy. There may be knowledge and skills for living sustainably that are already embedded in the traditions of local cultures and passed on intergenerationally through non-formal education (Bowers 2003; Polistina 2001). Formal education tends to place little value on such practical knowledge and skills, preferring instead abstract, technical or generalisable skills suitable for further advancing industrialisation and economic expansion. Education for an ecologically sustainable future requires a shift towards valuing and revitalising local knowledge of how to build self-reliant communities, and protecting this knowledge from the forces of commercialisation and consumerism (Bowers 2003; Polistina 2007).

Outdoor learning is particularly suitable for drawing on the grassroots expertise in sustainability found in local communities. For instance, a series of outdoor learning short courses developed at the University of Glamorgan focus on sustainability and global citizenship and recognise the extensive and long-term sustainable education already being undertaken in local communities in non-formal and informal learning contexts (Polistina 2003).

Examples of how formal education can incorporate local grassroots educators include local elders describing the traditional agricultural practices of the region, local mothers working directly with learners for health and sustainability in an outdoor walking group or organic garden; land owners explaining the installation of micro-hydro schemes, and representatives from sustainable communities demonstrating renewable energy and waste systems utilised on their property. Learners can also be inspired to make a shift from fast food, which is both unhealthy and unsustainable, to more sustainable foods such as local, seasonal, organic fruits and vegetables through learning traditional cooking skills in local courses, volunteering in organic edible gardens, working in allotments, and participating in community led health needs assessments.

In collaborative projects such as these, the primary formal educator takes a step back, enabling local people to become the educators. This learning experience creates a more social, informal and relaxed atmosphere than classroom education, and learners develop their understanding of, sensitivity towards, and respect for the sustainability knowledge and skills that can be found in local cultures. Having learners choose their own community-based project to complete the assessments makes the learning real and has immediate consequences for the learner's life and sustainability of their locality or region. This direct experience of sustainability within local communities can act as a basis for an increased understanding of international development issues, particularly the need to conserve, rather than destroy, aspects of cultures around the world that are already sustainable.

Critical Reflection and Thinking

Contrary to a culture of specificity and difference is one of hyperculture and indifference. This hyperculture is detrimental to sustainability literacy as it silences the need for self-critique, self-reflection, or reflection on the trajectory that society is taking. Critical reflective

thinking is a dialogue between learners and educators on aspects of cultural or social discourse; it considers the experiences of the group as a whole and provides a way of accounting for ourselves (Ghaye and Ghaye 2001). It demonstrates an awareness that actions and events are located in, and explicable by, reference to multiple perspectives as well as influenced by multiple historical and socio-political contexts (Hatton and Smith 2006).

One possible exercise to encourage critical reflective thinking consists of providing learners with a piece of discourse about sustainability from popular media, for example magazines, websites, advertisements or newspapers. Learners write whether they agree, disagree, like, dislike, understand or are confused by the information being provided. Once learners have written down their comments, they take them home without discussing them. At home they are instructed to forget what they have written and reflect on the information from another person's perspective, e.g., a Buddhist, single mother, managing director of a multi-national company, a teenager, or a father in a community in Tanzania. By the time they come back to the group there will be several different perspectives on the same piece of information. Seed et al (2007) take this exercise one stage further in the 'Council of All Beings', an imaginative exercise where participants wear masks and take on the perspectives of both human and non-human beings affected by environmental issues, including animals, plants, or even whole ecosystems such as rivers. This process can be utilised for any level of education. In higher education the critical reflection and thinking process would naturally progress through levels until a comprehensive and critical examination of information is undertaken, with innovative and achievable actions for cultural and social change being provided by the learner.

Personal skills for coping with being a change agent

Whilst a cultural shift towards sustainability is being sought globally, learners in Western countries do not live in the kind of society that supports the types of widespread changes, diversity of cultural systems or challenges to the status quo that are required for this shift to occur. Learners need to 'survive' being change agents for this cultural shift as they will encounter a variety of mental, physical, psychological and emotional battles with those seeking to sustain the status quo. Cultural and social power-brokers may safeguard the prominence of their power positions by discrediting, ridiculing and devaluing groups they perceive to be a threat. Learners and educators therefore need to be empowered to cope with these unreceptive behaviours.

Knowledge itself is a form of power, and learners will need skills in seeking out reliable, up-to-date and accessible information, from the latest climate science to an understanding of neoliberal critiques of sustainability and global citizenship. This requires practical research skills gained through self-directed learning, and can be achieved through mentored projects that learners chose for themselves. Ultimately, the educator becomes a facilitator and enabler of change rather than a disseminator of knowledge. Having gained knowledge for themselves and reflected deeply on their values within the context of the realities of the twenty first century, learners need skills in confident, persuasive public speaking to express their vision of a better world and back it up with evidence. They will also need skills in resisting bullying and harassment, which is, unfortunately, a common response to suggestions that change might be needed. This requires a deep sensitivity to the cultural context and so is an important part of cultural literacy.

Learners' self-confidence and self-esteem can be built through involvement in supportive networks of people working towards common goals, both within local communities and globally in the wider sustainability and global citizenship movement. Being part of a group with shared values can provide learners with valuable social support for their work as cultural change agents and a healthy release for the stresses that they will experience.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at cultural literacy as a fundamental skill required by learners in their development of sustainability literacy. The role of educator itself demands a high level of cultural literacy to ensure that education provides chances for critical reflection on culture from multiple perspectives, rather than being confined to limited imperialist views of other cultures. Reflection on our own culture and other cultural systems can help reveal the complex social, environmental and economic relationships that need to be changed to make a successful shift towards sustainability.

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