

# Bringing sustainability into sharper focus

*'Desirable but not sufficient' sums up John Huckle's response to the Spring 2011 issue of Teaching Geography. He argues that the articles contributing to the focus of sustainability were not sharp enough since contributors largely neglected issues of class, power and ideology, and the need to address radical social alternatives.*

Introducing the spring 2011 issue of Teaching Geography (vol 36, issue 1) with its focus on sustainability, the editor reminds readers of extreme weather events in 2010 which provided stark reminders of the power of nature; identifies the relationships between nature, society and geographical education as the theme of the issue; and introduces articles, that in her view, promote 'teaching for understanding' over 'predetermined ethics'. She claims that these articles 'explore the complex ideas and arguments that permeate the often taken for granted and sometimes oversimplistic notions grounded in sustainability and nature' (Biddulph, 2011, p. 5).

The purpose of this article is to argue that the editor's claim is not entirely valid and that if school geography is to truly 'promote pupils' engagement with current arguments (social, scientific, economic), tensions and actions associated with living sustainable lives', it should be more realistic about the big questions that education for sustainable development (ESD) raises, and the range of ideas that students should consider in exploring possible answers. Such big questions are not purely or uniquely geographical – as Rachel Lofthouse's (2011) article in the same issue can be seen to suggest – since they draw on a wide range of knowledge from the biophysical and social sciences, the arts and the humanities. I will make my argument by considering four such questions as they relate to the three principal articles in the spring issue (those by Roger Firth, David Hicks and Alun Morgan).

## What is sustainability?

Key to answering this question is encouraging students to see the world not in terms of phenomena or objects but in terms of relationships. It is relationships between things, or the way in which they are structured, that give them powers to sustain processes in the biophysical and social worlds that cause events which we may or may not experience. Climate change is the product of structures and processes in the atmosphere interacting with those in global society. Technological measures may mitigate temperature rise, but tackling climate change requires fundamental change to the power relations that shape dominant forms of development and underdevelopment around the world.

It is such thinking that leads Michael Bonnett (the philosopher whose ideas are explored in Firth's article) to suggest that education should foster sustainability as a frame of mind rather than as an aspect of policy (Bonnett, 2004). While governments and international agencies

issue policies that encourage schools to promote sustainable development (for example, the UN Decade of ESD or the Labour Government's framework for sustainable schools), such policies view nature and schooling instrumentally and generally restrict agendas to forms of ecological modernisation, or the greening of capitalism. They promote sustainability largely as rhetoric – a compromise between economic growth, environmental protection and social justice that the rich and powerful find expedient, feasible and possible.

Sustainability as a frame of mind is alive to relationships within and between biophysical and social systems that allow their mutual development to take place in sustainable ways. ESD therefore requires teachers and learners to be open and engaged with the complexity and meaning of things in the manner of great art or literature; attuned to harmony and discord in the world via a heightened sense of attachment; and capable of viewing nature in ways that are essentially poetic and non-manipulative. As Firth (2011) suggests, geography teachers should ask searching questions about nature: how can it be known, how is it being socially constructed, and how can it be constructed more sustainably? Challenging the nature/society dualism is central to such teaching as is encouraging students to recognise the aesthetic, existential and spiritual values of nature alongside its ecological, scientific and economic values. Humanistic and cultural geographies have key contributions to offer such teaching as it develops students who recognise the virtue of sufficiency over excess and of sustaining things, not in order to have something in hand for the future, but in order to let things be true to themselves, able to determine their own nature and development.

## Why are societies around the world not developing in sustainable ways?

It is significant that the editorial in the spring 2011 issue mentions extreme weather events but not the extreme economic events surrounding the most severe crisis of capitalism since the 1930s. Like many school geography lessons, the whole issue is somewhat blind to neo-liberal global capitalism and its role in precipitating the linked crises of economy and ecology. Harvey (2010) and George (2010) explain that neo-liberalism is essentially a project designed to restore class power by promoting financial innovation and the profitable absorption of surplus capital, no matter where it may lead. Based on privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, speculation, free trade and a supposedly self-regulating free market, it produced property and credit bubbles that

eventually burst around 2007/8. Governments came to the rescue of banks, heralding a new age of austerity for ordinary citizens, many of whom accept the myth that there is no alternative (Huckle, 2010).

In his article, Hicks (2011) seeks to restore the dissenting tradition in school geography by urging readers to address the four challenges of human well-being, climate change, peak oil, and the transition to more sustainable forms of development. He does mention the dominant litany of economic growth and the serious economic recession (p. 9), but in my view his treatment of the challenges does not give sufficient attention to the power relations that precipitate these linked challenges and prevent real progress towards realising human happiness and well-being, tackling climate change, promoting renewable energy, or spreading transition initiatives. David Harvey (2010), the foremost dissenting geographer, has taught us that political economy is the key to how space, place and nature are constantly made and re-made together with such challenges and possible solutions. Acknowledging this requires a conceptual revolution in the school subject, as outlined by John Morgan (2011).

### What has to happen to set societies on a more sustainable path?

Dissenting geographers suggest that realising sustainability requires radical forms of democracy and citizenship that give people power over how non-human and human nature are developed. As Susan George (2010) suggests, we are currently prisoners of a global system that puts the interest of finance and the economy (the rich and powerful) above the interests of society and the planet. New forms of environmental, ecological and global democracy/citizenship would invert this system, putting the interests of people and the planet before finance and the economy, allowing people to step off the treadmill of

production and consumption, and creating the conditions in which sustainability as a frame of mind could take root and become the new common sense.

Such thinking suggests that ESD in schools should be closely linked to the development of citizenship and political literacy. Students should consider the politics of sustainability – ideas and proposed policies from across the political spectrum – from the neo-liberal right through the social democratic centre to the green, socialist and anarchist left. They should come to their own tentative decisions on where they stand on this spectrum and on issues such as the sale of state forests, the ‘kettling’ of school students protesting against the loss of maintenance grants, or China’s purchase of African land and resources. The curriculum project I developed for WWF in the late 1980s was based on such ideas and issues (Huckle, 1988).

### Should our geography lessons guide societies towards sustainable development?

The theory and practice of political education and political literacy has well-developed ways of dealing with the social/ideological controversy and indoctrination that Alun Morgan (2011) outlines. Employing this theory and practice can ensure that geography teachers are engaging in education rather than advocacy, but as Morgan reminds us, many will think it desirable to promote sustainability as a frame of mind underpinned by the kind of ‘pre-determined ethic’ or universal moral principles set out in the Earth Charter (2011). This continues to prompt significant ESD initiatives around the world that combine ESD1 and ESD2 (see Morgan, 2011), and thus avoid ESD as simply policy or advocacy. Sustainability literacy requires the development of both moral autonomy and political literacy, and dissenting geography teachers should consult the literature on ecopedagogy (Kahn, 2011). | **TG**

#### Useful websites

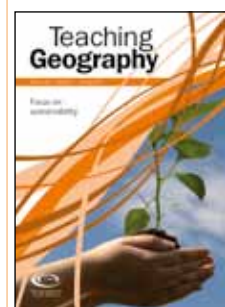
*Green Theory and Praxis*: online journal <http://greentheoryandpraxis.org/journal/index.php/journal>

#### References

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#### Online resources

Go to [www.geography.org.uk/tg](http://www.geography.org.uk/tg) and click on ‘Spring 2011’ to read the articles referred to.



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