Environmental Education Research

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Available online: 01 Jul 2010

To cite this article: John Foster (2002): Sustainability, Higher Education and the Learning Society, Environmental Education Research, 8:1, 35-41

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504620120109637

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Sustainability, Higher Education and the Learning Society

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SUMMARY The Dearing Report emphasised the idea of a ‘learning society’ as the new context of UK higher education, but conceived this on a model of adaptivity to economically- and technologically-driven change. While there are real shifts in their social relations here with which universities have to reckon, they can also be understood on a much richer model of exploratory social intelligence. The growing concern for environmental sustainability is both a recognition of the need for this alternative model, and a major ground of its importance.

Introduction: the learning society and changes in higher education

The still quite recent Dearing Report, following the most significant public enquiry into British higher education for over 30 years, was entitled Higher Education in the Learning Society. (NCIHE, 1997) It refers by that latter term to what is envisaged as a society where ‘all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning’, one in which ‘people in all walks of life recognise the need to continue in education and training throughout their working lives and see learning as enhancing the quality of life throughout all its stages’ (NCIHE, 1997, p. 9) The aim of higher education, says the Report, should be to sustain such a learning society by enabling it ‘to make progress through an understanding of itself and the world’ (NCIHE, 1997, p. 72). In addressing themselves to this aim, higher education institutions will need, as they always have, to be ‘dispassionate, committed to the pursuit of truth and able to reflect on the hardest and most complex issues facing the world’ (NCIHE, 1997, p. 75); but the context for these characteristics is now clearly to be understood as the need of individuals for flexible development opportunities throughout life (as well, of course, as that of society as a whole for an up-to-the-minute research base).
In a higher educational environment characterised by this kind of emphasis on flexible learning and self-development, one would expect to find a wide diversity of students in terms of their broad socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Diverse also would be the kinds of entry qualifications and previous educational experience which they brought, the life-stages they were at, the experience and commitments they had, their economic status, activity and sources of financial support for study, and their purposes and expectations in pursuing their various studies.

Correspondingly, there would be strong pressure to develop types of course and qualification intended to develop generic or transferable skills of enquiry and critical thinking, and to be ready to cross established disciplinary boundaries and develop new foci of study in pursuit of this. Study opportunities would be informed by awareness of a wide variety of possible relations between working and learning (and in general, there would be a marked tendency for that distinction to crumble); they would also reflect a growing concern with the practical import or upshot of learning and the knowledge it produces—a concern not necessarily for increased vocational relevance, though this would often be a factor, but a constant commitment to asking how what was being studied bore on the contemporary realities of individual or social life. Modes of access to this range of study possibilities would be characterised by considerable flexibility in terms of the time and locational commitments required of students, including imaginative combinations of distance (including internet-facilitated) and on-site study, and flexibility, too, as to where face-to-face contacts could take place. With a strong trend towards modularisation of course components, there would also be a multiplicity of combinatorial possibilities in respect of these components and of the kinds and levels of qualifications towards which they could count.

One would expect, too, to find all this set in a framework of new institutional relationships between higher education and the wider society in respect of teaching and learning, including new kinds of financial relationship between higher education and the state and corporate sectors, and between both and individual students; and, associated with, new modes of governance and quality assurance processes.

And this, of course, is just what we do find: all of it will be recognised by people currently working in UK higher education as the trend of the times, for good or ill. But is it good or ill? How should we take it? Should we welcome it? Or should we be wary of it, and even covertly (where we dare not be explicitly) resistant to it? I want to suggest that the answer to this depends on the spirit in which these developments are conceived, the kind of rationale which they are taken to have. Specifically, I shall consider two models for the epistemic and practical justification of a ‘learning society’ and the position of higher education within it. The bearing of these considerations on sustainability issues will, I hope, become clearer as I go on.

Models of a Learning Society

On the one hand, there is what I call the Tesco Model. You know how it is with your local Tesco, or any other supermarket—you get used to how everything is laid out, what’s kept on what shelf and how the shelves are sequenced, so that
you can structure your shopping list accordingly and steer your trolley round the place as quickly and with as little hassle as possible. Just when you have got this down to a fine art so that you can do it on auto-pilot while thinking about something more interesting, they change it all round in response to some deep and unsearchable marketing imperative, and you have to learn your way around all over again. In the same way, one current model of higher education has it facilitating individuals in mapping and re-mapping the shifting shelves of contemporary economic circumstance. Less mockingly, perhaps, this is a model of learning as adaptation to changing external circumstances—to the socio-economic and socio-cultural configurations of our ongoing productive engagement with the world. It is a kind of epistemic Darwinism, survival of the most cognitively adaptable. Higher education, on this account, is directed to the continual recasting of knowledge and skills required to maintain the value of human capital in the technologically-driven global economy. Higher education subserves the survival instinct of those societies (and within them, of those individuals) most ready to respond to change with cognitive and technological flexibility and self-reinvention.

Now this Tesco model is very obviously the Dearing model (no coincidence, perhaps, that the Director of Personnel for Sainsbury’s was on the Committee). There is, as a fragmented and only occasionally visible substratum within the Report, a vision of the good life as involving more than economic prosperity—value is accorded to understanding the world in its changes, and among the four main purposes of higher education is included ‘achieve personal fulfilment’ (NCIHE, 1997, p. 70). But the overwhelmingly dominant rhetoric throughout is economic:

In the next century, the economically successful societies will be those which become learning societies ... When capital, manufacturing processes and service bases can be transferred internationally, the only stable source of competitive advantage (other than natural resources) is a nation’s people ... The pace of change in the work-place will require people to re-equip themselves, as new knowledge and new skills are needed for economies to compete, survive and prosper ... This requires a learning society, which embraces both education and training, for people at all levels of achievement, before, during and, for continued personal fulfilment, after working life ... the long-term demand from industry and commerce will be for higher levels of education and training for their present and future workforce. The UK cannot afford to lag behind ... etc., etc. (NCIHE, 1997, pp. 7,9)

The whole Report is indeed peppered with references to the kind of higher educational opportunities which individuals will need in order to survive in the labour market of the future; and apart from a few ritual nods in the direction of ‘understanding for its own sake’, everything said about research is similarly instrumental and economy-driven.

Contrast with this the second, what I call the exploratory or Heuristic Model of a learning society. This starts from the perception that we humans are creatures whose relation to the world in which we find ourselves is constantly problematising itself—creatures whose being-in-the-world is always having to
be achieved and re-achieved through the sense we make, as representationally-conscious agents, of who and where we are. This is not just a constant but a necessary process, since while we cannot stand outside our representations, we can recognise that they are conditioned by our various kinds of situatedness and that as conditions fluctuate, shift and ravel, they are always liable to move into contestation (whether between groups and individuals, or across time within the individual’s own sense-making). We are, that is, sense-makers who live in and by the sense we make, but whose very processes of living are constantly calling that sense into question—yet we cannot, ultimately, point to any distinction between the world which changes around us and through us, and the sense of it which we do ongoingly make. (Any such distinction would itself be a key part of that sense.) We inhabit the sense we make, because there is nowhere outside it for us to be human; thus it is impossible to test our sense-making by matching it up against either a reality of which sense is being made, or a methodology by which sense is canonically to be made, in such a way as to warrant ‘objectively’ our sense-making activities. We can ask: Is this the most intelligent, the most alert and responsive sense I can make here?—and these terms express what may be called standards to which we try to conform in sense-making. But they are standards not externally given, but arising as our intuitive apprehension of what is being realised in the whole, radically creative process.

If sense-making is ultimately self-dependent, how do we know that we are accommodating, in the sense we make, the changing configuration of the real? We live and learn, it is lazily said. But ‘learning from experience’—really, openly so doing—is actually the hardest thing in the world. Since we want if at all possible to stay comfortably within our assumptions and basic patterns of understanding, what is vastly more usual is to learn how, without conscious bad faith, to accommodate experience to the sense we are already disposed to make of it—how to neutralise the inherent danger, the perpetual ambush, of the new.

Given this, it would seem that constantly, or at least periodically, re-challenging at radical levels the sense we make, is the condition of being entitled to trust ourselves to it. This is not any mere matter of adaptively adjusting our (established) selves to changes in our circumstances, but rather a commitment to re-discover and re-create ourselves at key junctures—to allowing both what we encounter and the frameworks which shape our understanding of what we encounter to be open to change, surrendering ourselves to the inescapable creativity and open-endedness of our grapple with the emergent.

This kind of learning disposition will of course express itself in practice in terms of how people engage with the knowledges and skills necessary for the work they do—just as on the first model. But this aspect of life will not be the only or even perhaps the major driver here. Rather, the concern will be with our identity, relations and values across our lives as a whole, which may well include a disposition to be critical of any fixed role in those lives for such values as material prosperity. Seeing ourselves as beings with permanent responsibility for re-creating the whole sense we make of ourselves puts ‘the pace of change in the workplace’ into its proper perspective. Living as self-discovery and self-creation involves all our living relations—work, family, public involvement and citizenship, art and imagination, the non-human world ...
Social Learning and Social Intelligence

The connection with sustainability begins, I hope, to emerge. A learning society in this second, heuristic sense would be one where we were permanently prepared to be taken by surprise by the way things turn out—and as one corollary, wary of locking ourselves into undertakings where we can afford to leave ourselves no room for such surprise. It would be radically precautionary as part of being radically open to life.

I will come back to this in a moment. But I also want to emphasise how this second model enables us to envisage a genuinely learning society, and not just, as on the first model, essentially a collectivity of learning individuals developing themselves with an eye to their (individual or collective) competitive advantage. We are sense-makers in a way which is irreducibly both individual and social. Only by individuals can sense be made, but the sense they make must always be ‘social’, that is a collaboratively-created shared or common sense which lives in and by the transpersonal sui generis existence of language and meaning. So ‘lifelong learning’, insofar as it emerges from these conditions as our appropriate epistemic commitment, is both an individual strategy and one which must be replicated at the levels of social and institutional learning.

That strategy would require such a society to be culturally mature as well as institutionally sophisticated: an orientation towards the past as well as the future is essentially involved, a constant creative awareness of earlier cultural phases and arrangements as orienting our heuristic exploration. It would affect, too, the kind of ‘social intelligence contract’ expressed in the relation between education and other key social institutions. In the higher educational context, as I have argued recently in these pages (Foster, 2001) this relation would mean not only the effective disappearance of the distinction between people’s working and learning lives, but also a commitment to a learning model in the way society draws on research in its policy and decision-making. The effectiveness and legitimacy of the analyses and methodologies which such research supplies can only be as good as the attunement of users to the full complexity of the values, understandings and problem-framings now interacting within the environmental and comparable arenas. In a genuine learning society providing or improving policy and management resources for users means exploring with users, through a wide range of interactive research and learning partnerships, the contested social meanings and ends in pursuit of which such resources have to be deployed.

Social intelligence here would also depend on a culturally richer model of rationality, of intellectual coherence and responsibility—one which, in educational terms, gave full weight to the role of the humanities and of meta-scientific modes of understanding in general in bringing richer human self-understanding into play. A learning society lives by the fullest exploration of experience, imaginatively alert to all its complexities, including its often paradoxical and ungraspable character and its emotional depths. Correspondingly, at the institutional level, a true learning society would be one with a pervasively dialogical cast—the shared sense informing understanding and action would emerge from a generous democracy of discourses, sustained by respect for the best argument and nourished by a plentiful flow of public information, and would generate social reflection, policy advice and actual decisions through appropriately deliberative and inclusionary processes.
Learning Society as Sustainable Society

And what of environmental sustainability? It seems clear, as already hinted, that a learning society conceived on this second model would have in place at least many of the deep structural conditions for such sustainability. It is not just a matter of the strong disposition towards precaution in a society framed around genuinely exploratory learning. There is also the resistance, built into its inherently dialogical-democratic social learning processes, to being driven by technological imperatives expressing the power of epistemically and socially unaccountable elites of expertise.

Moreover, one wants to say that such a learning society would be operating with an *ecologically realistic* picture of the kind of creature humans actually are. It sees us not as increasingly sophisticated global techno-managers, but as, for all our energy of insight, thoroughly fallible beings—beings, indeed, whose representational form of consciousness makes us easily the most fallible terrestrial species. It is premised on our anticipation and calculation taking us only so far, on our minds not being those of disembodied intelligences but shaped by perspectives always more or less subtly responding to the pressures of our wants and drives.

But I would go further. It seems to me that having such a learning society in place is not just a key prerequisite for operating sustainably, but actually our only really reliable handle on whether we *have*, as the kind of creature we are, a development path that could be called sustainable. If sustainability means living with the grain of nature, then at bottom the life of genuinely heuristic engagement is the best humans can do. I will conclude by recapitulating the argument which I have already offered readers of this journal in support of this claim (Foster, 2001).

Any attempt to make development sustainable depends on a baseline requirement that some quantum or other representing the human demand on natural regeneration remain constant over time. Whether cashed out as planetary carrying capacity, critical natural capital or whatever, the central idea is that there is some overall level of *something* which we can both measure and hope to keep constant. There is now an extensive spectrum of indicators devised to assist in this process. Such indicators, however, do not simply *register* whether particular forms of development are ‘sustainable’ or not. The processes of constructing and interpreting them rely on collaborative judgement—as regards for instance the trustworthiness of the institutions involved, the acceptability of the assumed scientific framings, and the validity of the various statistical measures in relation to people’s lived experience. Such judgement is also basic to any process whereby the totality of movements among different kinds of indicator agreed to be meaningful and robust is taken to represent a sustainable trend (or otherwise). We can only exercise such judgement by appealing to, and collaboratively confirming in various forms of discussion and interaction, our best sense of how human life goes with the grain of nature, of what makes best human-natural sense of the different options we have. Thus the fundamental ground of sustainability, considered as the conservation of any kind of quantum, has to be the continued creative deployment by human beings of some of their central skills in life-intelligent sense-making. And the only warrant we can have that we are constructing that grounding in life-intelligence, I suggest, is the extent to
which we behave individually and collaboratively as a learning society in my second, heuristic sense.

My coda is straightforward and polemic. The notion of a learning society was not invented by the Dearing Committee. The developments which they outlined, in the reductionist and instrumental terms which (inevitably?) they chose to use, certainly represent deep-seated, slowly-gathering changes in attitudes to higher education and its relations within the wider society. There seems no prospect of resiling from such changes to recover the liberal university of the Robbins, still less the pre-Robbins era. But equally, there is nothing to prevent us from interpreting, conditioning for and actively embracing them in the spirit of the fuller, more humane understanding of their import and potential upshot which I have been sketching. People committed to environmental sustainability, in particular, have the best of reasons for doing so.

Note on contributor

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