CHAPTER 14

Student Voice and Its Role in Sustainability

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Introduction

Education has the potential to be a key force for sustainable development if dialogic spaces can be created in which both students and teachers have the freedom to examine and debate challenging issues. A key proposition of transformative learning theory recognises the fundamental distinction between instrumental and communicative learning (Habermas 1971, 1984). Instrumental learning focuses on the transmission and acquisition of skills and information to do specific tasks and problem-solve. Communicative learning involves understanding the meaning of what others 'communicate concerning values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment and democracy' (Mezirow 1991, p.8). There is an important distinction to be made between dialectic and dialogic discourse. In dialectic discussion, the aim is to arrive at a common understanding, whereas dialogic discussion, coined by Bakhtin (1981), 'does not resolve itself … [but] through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another' (Sennett 2013, p.19). This empathetic reappraisal of assumptions may encourage a more compassionate and understanding society and help address the five guiding principles of sustainable development identified in the UK Government's strategy document 'Securing the Future' (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2005, p.16):

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- Living within environmental limits
- Ensuring a strong, healthy and just society
- Achieving a sustainable economy
- Promoting good governance
- Using sound science responsibly

The social justice once championed by the further education (FE) sector seems to have lost traction; the more FE is positioned as a tool for the economy. Although this may limit the potential for transformative education, particularly as neoliberal policy has positioned FE students as consumers rather than citizens, the social values founded on altruism are still widely held by many who work in FE (Randle and Brady 1997; Jephcote and Salisbury 2009). Nevertheless, as Schumacher (1997, p.208) states:

> The volume of education has increased and continues to increase, yet so do pollution, exhaustion of resources, and the dangers of ecological catastrophe. If still more education is to save us, it would have to be education of a different kind: education that takes us into the depth of things.

To do this we need to move from learning as an instrumental commodity to a transformative model in which:

> learning is understood as a process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action. (Mezirow 1996, p.162)

It is only through transformational learning that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can ever be realized.

Box 14.1:

Morrell and O'Connor (2002, p.xvii) suggest transformative education affects a change in perspective and identify the following characteristics of transformative learning. Consider these in relation to your practice:

- A deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions
- A shift of consciousness that alters our way of being in the world

(*continued*)

Box 14.1: (continued)

- Understanding ourselves, our self-locations and our relationships with others in the world
- Understanding relations of power in interlocking structures of race, class and gender
- Envisioning alternative approaches and possibilities for social justice.

With issues such as political apathy, disillusionment, radicalization and ongoing disparities in educational achievement, transformative education could potentially play a key role in challenging the concerns which have significant ramifications for our local, national and global society. Globalization and the dominance of free-market capitalism have accelerated social and economic inequality, both within countries and internationally (Hobsbawm 2008). This, coupled with the political global ambition of global liberal democracy, heightened since 9/11, has resulted in mass human catastrophe and fear, population displacement, fear of terrorism, fear of immigration and fear of the next catastrophe. The UNHCR (2014) reports the number of displaced people as 45 million, with over half coming from Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Syria and Sudan and the majority seeking refuge within their own countries. This has a significant impact on the whole world and its economic, environmental and political stability. In the UK, the prevention of radicalization, in which vulnerable young people can be manipulated or seduced by extremist views, has become part of a teacher's remit. The Prevent Strategy (Gov.UK 2011) requires teachers to address this in the classroom, where young people may have extreme views about issues such as immigration, war, religion and violence. However, a key approach of this strategy is to build strong partnerships between local police forces and schools, colleges and universities, potentially resulting in:

> intelligence gathering outsourced to teachers and other frontline service providers in a way that necessarily conflicts with their primary professional obligations and responsibilities. (Liberty 2010, p.4)

This demonstrates how such a strategy may curtail opportunities for open debate to challenge such issues. This could result in indoctrination at one extreme, although if handled well, could potentially encourage a transformational learning experience at the other.

Although political engagement is a significant issue in the UK and the decline in the turnout of young people at general elections has been a concern for many years, their turnout has increased from 51 % in 2010 (Dar 2013) to 58 % in 2015 (Fieldhouse 2015, online). Research by DEMOS (Birdwell et al. 2015) suggests young people are not defined by traditional left- and right-wing politics; instead they are concerned about the gap between rich and poor in the UK, and key issues such as affordable living costs, housing, unemployment, healthcare and cost of higher education. To increase political engagement further, Dewey's (1916) philosophy of a democratic education would prepare people for active citizenship in a participatory democracy. His philosophy is a means for social development and democratic empowerment which requires us to educate for inquiry and critical reflection about the uncertainties and challenges of living in a constantly changing world. This requires dialogic spaces in which issues affecting young people can be debated safely and honestly to develop understanding of the views of others, and challenge their own views and assumptions. This can lead to transformational learning, change in thinking and, importantly for Dewey *and* ESD, action.

However, finding spaces for such dialogue is increasingly challenged by the constraints of market-based mechanisms within the education system. To create these spaces, a different relationship is needed between students and teacherst—one of partnership and collaboration. When students' views are taken seriously by a teacher or by an organization, it is empowering; students see themselves as agents of change and see that their voice matters and can make a difference. Although recognition of the need for student views has increased, the locus of control is still with the organization and/or the teacher and rarely moves beyond tokenism. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation is a useful framework to analyse the levels of student participation in democratic processes.

Box 14.2:

Read through Arnstein's (1969) levels which range from non-participation at 1 to full-participation at 8, and the explanation that follows and then answer these questions:

- At which level do you consider the students in your organization to be?
- Is there room for improvement?
- Can you see how this could be encouraged?

(*continued*)

Box 14.2: (continued)

8. Citizen Control
7. Delegated Power
6. Partnership
5. Placation
4. Consultation
3. Informing
2. Therapy
1. Manipulation

This model conceptualizes the underlying power dynamic at each level and the semblances of participation at the mid-point of the ladder which Arnstein (1969, p.219) refers to as a 'window-dressing ritual', recognizing that like spinach, 'no one is against it in principle because it is good for you' (p.216). Without a redistribution of power, participation is tokenistic as the power holders are able to maintain the status quo. The upper rungs of the ladder metaphorically represent empowerment, where powers of decision-making are distributed to all stakeholders.

Although it is not a new concept, transformative education is a critical component of ESD. Mezirow (1978) is attributed with the evolution of transformative education which, in short, is the transformation of a person though learning. His work was influenced by Kuhn's (1962) paradigm, Habermas (1971, 1984) and his dialectical contribution to educational theory and the work of Freire in the 1970s on 'conscientization'. For a person to change, we need to create the conditions for dialogue and democracy in our learning environments: a prerequisite for the realization of ESD. As Mezirow (1998, p.197) argues:

> learning to think for oneself involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings.

He developed the concept of 'meaning perspectives' which is our overall world view developed through primary and secondary socialization and meaning perspectives change as we respond to life experiences. However, our cultural assumptions may limit our willingness, or ability, to challenge or question these perspectives. These assumptions thus become a double-edged

sword which validate our experiences on the one hand, but also constrain our experience. A meaning perspective is a frame of reference constituted by habits of mind; shaping how we perceive people, events, beliefs, experience and ourselves. Habits of mind comprise six dimensions as follows:

These habits of mind consist of smaller components such as 'sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments', or meaning schemes (Mezirow 2000, p.18). A number of meaning schemes work together to generate our meaning perspective. Meaning schemes influence our point of view and are often unconscious responses to what we see, how we see it and how we react. It is because they are habitual, that they need to be examined through critical reflection, and most importantly critical self-reflection.

According to Mezirow (2000), there are four types of learning:

- elaborating existing meaning perspectives or frames of reference;
- learning new meaning perspectives or frames of reference;
- transforming habits of mind;
- transforming points of view.

Reassessment of meaning schemes and perspectives, and therefore the realization of the five guiding principles of ESD, relies on challenging assumptions, exploring alternative perspectives, transforming old ways of thinking and acting on new perspectives, all of which transformational learning can promote (Mezirow 1997).

Box 14.3:

What assumptions do you come across in your students? How do you approach this?

What could you do to expose students to alternative viewpoints and promote critical reflection on their own assumptions?

What are the potential barriers to transforming 'habits of mind' within your own practice?

Whereas instrumental learning is the acquisition of skills and knowledge, the 'how' and the 'what' of learning, transformative learning is a social process of examining meaning perspectives and schemes, whereby prior interpretations and assumptions are critically examined to form new

meaning: the 'why' of learning. Mezirow (1995, p.50) argues that transformations often follow some variations of the following phases:

- A disorienting dilemma
- A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
- Planning a course of action
- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
- Provision trying of new roles
- Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

This can be simplified into four key stages of the transformation process: disorientating dilemma; critical reflection; rational discourse; action. The first stage is for us to experience something which does not fit into our pre-existing meaning structure and causes a disorientating dilemma or disjuncture, which may be epochal or incremental over time. If our experience fits into our meaning structures then we are not engaging in transformational learning.

Jarvis (2006, p.134) defines transformative education as follows:

> Human learning is the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person—body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and sense)—experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

He considers all human learning is the transformation of experience which begins with disjuncture, or a sense of not-knowing. By means of thought, emotion or action, or combination of these, meaning is given to our experience and the disjuncture is resolved. This process changes who we are as a person as it 'affects the self of the student' (Jarvis 2009, p.23).

The Education and Skills Act (2008) requires student views to be sought to fulfil accountability measures defined by Ofsted, rather than to

activate a sense of democratic agency. Research studies in student voice (Pedder and McIntyre 2006; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Thompson 2009) report improvements in organizations, teaching practice, teacher–student relationships, communication and learning, as a result of seeking student views on aspects of learning and educational experience. However, it gives a mixed landscape in terms of agency, with most organizations and teachers using student voice as a consultation process, restricting students' agency due to the teacher–student power relationship (Mannion 2007), as well as concerns that the consultation does not always result in responding to students' ideas (Pedder and McIntyre 2006; Whitty and Wisby 2007; Thompson 2009).

Ruddock and Fielding (2006a, b) have identified three key elements of student voice: authenticity, inclusion and power. Authenticity is essential if students are to participate fully; it should connect with their needs, aspirations and lives (Smyth 2006) and they need to feel the commitment from their teachers and organizations. Inclusion is imperative to ensure all voices are heard and avoid an 'unconsulted majority' (Pedder 2009, p.4). Clearly, within student voice there are power relations, but the issue of power also needs to be negotiated in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. For students to exercise their power to become active citizens, they need to have a sense of their personal ability, engage in dialogue and build alliances with teachers, peers and others in order to enact their voice, and agency. If this is misappropriated by management, students may feel betrayed by the process (Roberts and Nash 2009).

Box 14.4:

- Reflect on the three key elements of student voice: authenticity, inclusion and power.
- Can you identify any issues with regard to these elements and the mechanisms for student voice within your institution?
- What could be done to address the issues you have identified?

There are representative bodies of students within FE, but these are controlled by staff, thus creating a façade of delegated power and consultation designed to placate students and meet Ofsted requirements. The emphasis on curriculum consultation is employer-led, focused on job-specific skills for employment:

> Providers and employers need to collaborate to ensure that the training provided helps to reduce national skills shortages and equips students with the skills that employers are looking for. (Ofsted 2014, p.6)

These key decisions about FE are based on traditional ways of thinking about learning and education and suffer from short-termism and short-sightedness. We are educating students for an unknown future and are basing our assumptions on what they need on old epistemological foundations which are fundamentally flawed (Robinson 2009). Attempts to embed ESD into the curriculum are important, but alone cannot address the issues which ultimately require a fundamental transformation of the current education system, not reform. Education can then be freed from the constraints which shackle it to these longstanding epistemological assumptions which have given rise to the National Curriculum, standardized testing, exams and the organization of learning premised on fallacious notions of intelligence. Learning within education currently assumes psychological (cognitive) models of learning whereby learning is seen primarily as a cause and effect relationship, as an intellectual activity located in specific parts of the brain. Furthermore, Smyth (2006, p.279) suggests:

> It is no coincidence that disengagement from school by young adolescents [in most Western countries] has intensified at precisely the same time as there has been a hardening of educational policy regimes that have made schools less hospitable places for both students and teachers.

Now is not the time for complacency, opportunities for democratic involvement of student voice even at classroom level can be utilized to help young people see that current challenges in our global society are not immutable or beyond human control, and therefore become more aware of their own sense of agency. Orr (1992) developed the concept of ecological literacy which means to be literate in our practices and knowledge of the interconnectedness of life on earth:

> the disorder of ecosystems reflects a prior disorder of mind, making it a central concern to those institutions that purport to improve minds. In other words, the ecological crisis is in every way a crisis of education. (Orr 2005, p.x)

Orr (1994) argues that education has become servile to the dominant assumptions that human domination of nature is good; the growth

economy is natural; all knowledge, regardless of consequences is valuable and material progress is our right. This instrumental rationality destabilizes humanistic and democratic values and practices in education and society and legitimates a worsening of social inequities and a continuation of the industrialization of the earth. As such, we are in a crisis of sustainability.

Box 14.5:

Read the core aspects of ecological literacy (Orr 1992) summarized below, and consider embedding the skills, attitudes and knowledge needed to develop ecologically literate students. What challenges might there be in embedding these in your practice?

1. Principles of Living Systems: An understanding of the natural world, including the cyclical nature and interconnectedness of natural systems, provides a deep sense of place.
2. Design Inspired by Nature: Humans need to critically examine economic, environmental, social and cultural structures in order to transform how food, shelter, energy, materials are provided and how they seek their livelihood.
3. Systems Thinking: This acknowledges the complexities of ecological, social, economic and other systems but emphasizes the need for making links when seeking solutions to interdependent problems.
4. Ecological Paradigm and the Transition to Sustainability: A world view that sees humans as part of ecological systems is needed, in order to envision a future which reduces poverty and improves human well-being, whilst conserving the planet.
5. Collaboration, Community Building and Citizenship: Sustainability is a collaborative enterprise requiring partnerships, dialogue, negotiation and participation in decision-making to empower people to create a better society.

As Mezirow (1997) argues, transformative learning does not occur when new learning fits comfortably into our existing meaning perspectives. We need to take students out of their comfort zone to enable them to develop greater autonomy. However, Boyd (1998) differed in this respect, as he saw transformative learning as an opportunity to build greater interdependence and compassionate relationships with other people. Furthermore, as

part of the transition to sustainability, Orr's (1992) agenda ethically guides society to meet basic needs and ensure human survival. This challenges existing assumptions, as the current refugee crisis in Europe exemplifies. When discomfort is experienced it can result in anxiety and psychological defence mechanisms which may prevent new interpretations, as students default to compatible assumptions: transformation is a process which may take time for students to feel unthreatened by.

Integral to Mezirow's theory of transformative education is experience, critical reflection and rational discourse.

> Learning experiences establish a common base from which each student constructs meaning through personal reflection and group discussion … The meanings that students attach to their experiences may be subjected to critical scrutiny. The teacher may consciously try to disrupt the student's worldview and stimulate uncertainty, ambiguity, and doubt in students about previously taken-for-granted interpretations of experience. (Tennant 2003, p.112)

Critical reflection necessitates self-examination and critical evaluation and may cause discomfort as the validity of new interpretations and assumptions are evaluated. These points of disruption can be recognized as building blocks for potential transformative learning by creating dialogic spaces where alternative interpretations can be explored. In the current education system, these opportunities within a learning context can be suppressed by the frameworks of the official curriculum.

Rational discourse is where we engage in dialogue with others to explore newly discovered mismatches between our experience and our mental structures and explore other potential interpretations whereby the process of transformation becomes a shared social experience. Psychological models of learning generally neglect the social interaction integral to learning. In transformative education, the changed person is the outcome of the learning (Jarvis and Parker 2005).

Box 14.6:

- Can you think of any examples where the transformation process may have been experienced by your students?
- What was the outcome of this experience?
- If you cannot think of any examples, how could you try to create the conditions for this process to occur?

Developing Our Thinking

Bateson (1972, p. 461) suggests most of us are 'governed by epistemologies that we know to be wrong'. Senge (1990, p.73), a leading systems writer, further suggests 'it appears we have latent skills as system thinkers that are undeveloped, even repressed by formal education in linear thinking'. This lack of systems, or holistic, thinking is, according to Korten (1995, p.11), the major obstruction to realizing the guiding principles of ESD:

> When we limit ourselves to fragmented approaches to dealing with systemic problems, it is not surprising that our solutions prove inadequate. If our species is to survive the predicaments we have created for ourselves, we must develop a capacity for whole-systems thought and action.

Systems thinking moves us towards a more holistic way of thinking about the interconnectedness of nature and society and the critical challenges we face in promoting economic and social well-being whilst protecting the environment.

> To understand things systemically literally means to put them into a context, to establish the nature of their relationships. (Capra 1996, p.27)

However, systemic thinking is still unfamiliar; it tends to be an effort rather than a habit of mind as fragmentary thinking is still habitual and its limits are increasingly apparent. As Sterling (2001, p.14) argues:

> most mainstream education sustains unsustainability—through uncritically reproducing norms, by fragmenting understanding, by sieving winners and losers, by recognising only a narrow part of the spectrum of human ability and need, by an inability to explore alternatives, by rewarding dependency and conformity, and by servicing the consumerist machine.

To create the conditions for a participative citizenry in the future we need to engage students in every dimension of their educational experience. Research on student voice (Fielding and Bragg 2003, p.15) shows the benefits of democratic participation and consultation:

- Developing a positive sense of self and agency
- Developing enquiring minds and learning new skills
- Developing social competences and new relationships
- Reflecting on their own learning
- A chance to be active and creative.

As do the findings from an ESRC/TLRP project, 'Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning' (2003).

These findings show the potential to enhance the lives and experiences of both students and teachers in and beyond the learning environment. The recognition and understanding of their agency as active and creative collaborators is enhanced through systemic thinking on issues within their organization and on more challenging issues within the wider community. This is empowering for students and has significant implications for their future engagement in society, which is aptly captured by Rudduck and Fielding (2006a, b, p.229):

> atomistic consumerism is superseded by co-operative agency (that) is fundamental to the revitalisation of our schools as learning communities within a democratic society.

Conclusion

The potential of collaborative and democratic relationships between students, teachers, staff and managers, to challenge practices and extend existing knowledge, skills and perspectives, is an untapped resource in education. It is vital for education and personal development but foremost for its critical contribution to wider society in the form of active citizenry. However, student participation in consultation is not enough. It must encompass all students to ensure every voice is heard and not simply reflect the status quo, but provide an opportunity to challenge existing practices, create new knowledge, innovate and transform.

However, the conditions needed to create these open spaces in which the outcome is uncertain, are not currently in place. FE, like other education sectors in the UK, is constrained by performativity and surveillance. Working in these conditions makes it challenging to develop dialogic spaces. Yet, it is through a dialogic approach that students can be empowered to transform habits of mind and meaning perspectives. It is the transformations in values, attitudes and behaviours that will ensure students not only have an active role in changing or shaping their education, but also in working towards achieving the principles of sustainable development to secure a sustainable future.

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Further Reading

Jarvis (2006b) 'Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning' concentrates on the processes of human learning. It considers the fact that research into learning has been mainly psychological which has simplified its conceptualization. Jarvis argues that learning is existential, and gives much inspiration for a new paradigm of learning theory which is related to theories of human learning.