

# What if critical reflection doesn't lead to sustainable development?

**Zaria Greenhill** raises a potential conflict between education for sustainability methodologies of critical thinking and multiple perspectives, and an ideology which, she argues, is based on particular underlying values and political viewpoints.

My studies in education for sustainability at London South Bank University have brought up some crucial questions about conflicts in ideology and political bias within the development and sustainable education movement.

A powerful aspect of globalisation is its closeness to global capitalism and the steady entrenchment of market-led and consumerist societal values. When 'development' happens it is usually intended as economic development, accompanied by the opening of consumer markets and the spread of market-based and consumer culture and values. Education for sustainability presents alternative values, which inform the educational approaches of practitioners.

Downs (1993) developed the model of education 'as' development, intended as human development which empowers people to take control of their own communities and futures. Sterling (2003) develops this further by advocating a paradigm shift in base precepts of education to prepare learners for a postmodern world in which power and futures are up for negotiation. These approaches seek to synthesize educational methods with the content and expected outcomes of the education. Learners are not to sit in rows imbibing the teachers' wisdom; they are to bring their own opinions and experiences to the learning arena. Learners are to be encouraged to make links between subject disciplines in order to learn to see links and systems in the world. Learners are to be listened to, perhaps sitting in a circle, and learn to listen to each other. They develop critical thinking and are encouraged not to believe everything they are told but to consider ideas independently, using their self-constructed knowledge. Critically aware and reflective learners are the desired result of these views of education.

However, critical thinking and reflection do not necessarily segue into believing in social and environmental justice and support for the movement against exploitative global capitalism. What distinguishes education for sustainability is the politics, or the values, underlying the practice, which are exemplified and transmitted by educators. There is a self-selection which operates here: those of us who hold similar political viewpoints gather and work, study, campaign and debate together to reinforce our political viewpoints until they are taken as a norm and transmitted to those we educate. We may strenuously educate

for critical awareness and encourage debate and multiple perspectives, but an ideological hegemony is still created.

My contentions are two: Firstly, if we educate from our powerful political viewpoints, how far do we ourselves question or debate our political viewpoints? Is it the case that unquestioned political 'truths' are passed down without the necessary space or diversity around them for learners to really and truly be able to create their own knowledge and truths. Secondly, how valid is our educational methodology and the assumption that participatory methods and classroom democracy will lead in the direction that our ideology dictates?

What is transmitted without question can be described in two ways: one is tradition and cultural norm. The other is

brainwashing. It is complex to either reconcile or distinguish between these two perspectives. The other point, which is fundamental, is that essentially we are educating with important scientific 'truths' behind us: climate change is an example of a theory which has matured into

accepted scientific truth. Similarly, the global gap between rich and poor is widening, a truth reached through widespread research (Lockwood and Madden, 1997). We have to stick to our truths, and we have deeply held and powerful values bases for what we do. Can we cope if our intelligent learners learn to question our truths? What happens between diversity of opinion and dissidence within the movement?

Here follow some examples of alternative uses of the methodologies and educational practices developed within the development education and education for sustainability fields.

Naomi Klein, in the bestseller *No Logo* (2001), describes how market research companies instrumentalise school children in cash-strapped American public schools with creative educational methods. She quotes one example where cereal tasting is used as a science teaching tool to 'educate' children about comparing values and examining their own opinions. The principal of the school was quoted as saying 'it's a learning experience'. The school was apparently paid \$600 for the results of the kids' 'experiments' with cereal taste. Another example (Tabor, M, 1999) was cable educational TV channel Noggin giving high school kids

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disposable cameras in order to record and analyse aspects of their daily lives. The idea was 'to find out what sparks kids these days'. This is an example of learners being encouraged to create their own knowledge and to value their own daily experiences and environments as valid knowledge of use to themselves and others. This idea could be beautifully used in sustainability education. Nike has also been involved in various 'school partnership' schemes with interesting educational aims (Cloues, 2004-5)

Sophie Reynolds (2007), a peace campaigner and educator, described the methods used at advertising agency JWT for staff development, which were extremely similar to the participatory, inclusive and learner-empowering methodology she had used for radical peace campaigner training. She concluded that adoption by huge corporate bodies with lots of resources was an endorsement of her education methods: big business expects maximum output and efficiency from methods used. She also presumed that critical reflection and self-realisation would lead participants to reject big business and change their politics. Not at all, they all loved their high powered jobs even more because they felt valued and relaxed at work.

How can we, as educators, tread the line between teaching to our values and holding firm to them, while also making learners aware of multiple perspectives and develop critical thinking which may vary from our firmly-held values? How can we be more explicit about the political perspectives underlying our practice while not diluting their power? Should we attempt to further cohere the development and sustainability education field in order to resolve these

issues? As the educational methods we use are being appropriated by the mainstream, should we go further in distinguishing what we stand for and what we aim to teach and learn?

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## GENDERWATCH: still watching...

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Kate Myers is Emeritus Professor, University of Keele. She is a Senior Associate of The Leadership for Learning Network at the University of Cambridge.

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