

Can education for sustainability transform the world of business?

Glen Strachan reviews the contribution of business to sustainability, reports on some examples of how education for sustainability is engaging the business world and assesses the level of change that is taking place.

Where do you stand on big business? Do you believe that the values that underpin the decisions made in the boardrooms of companies can be changed by education and debate? Or is it more productive to challenge these values through protests against globalisation and campaigns for fair trade? In the last edition of this journal Barbara Toepfer (2003) rightly pointed out that many large corporations were taking up the challenge laid down by Kofi Annan in the nine principles of the Global Compact. To respond properly to this challenge Toepfer identified the need for global education at all levels in corporate organisations.

Why should we be concerned about educating business? Educating consumers to demand change is one way to influence business, but influence can work in the other direction. Large companies have the capacity to bring about change both in their suppliers and their consumers. The Co-op, although not a typical company in many respects, illustrates this well. It has taken the decision to make all its own brand chocolate fair trade, working in partnership with the Day Chocolate Company and the Kuapa Kokoo co-operative in Ghana. The Co-op promotes the fair trade chocolate in its stores along with information about its policy. To avoid fair trade chocolate the consumer has to make a deliberate choice.

Large corporations do have an enormous influence over consumers. If corporations were to make a substantial shift towards sustainable practices this would have a significant impact on the wider world. Many corporations are engaging with the sustainability agenda, at least partially, through environmental management and assessment systems (EMAS) or through corporate social responsibility (CSR). Some companies boast examples of good practice in delivering education to their workforce on CSR and sustainability, as illustrated below. This supports another comment made by Toepfer, that in certain cases the private sector may be leaving the public sector behind in terms of developing global citizens. This phenomenon is supported by research that I carried out in the Yorkshire and Humber Region to inform the writing of a regional implementation plan for sustainable development education (Goddard et al, 2002). Where big corporations have the resources to invest in training the workforce in sustainable development they are providing examples of good practice that go beyond what is available in the public sector. But the examples were few and far between.

Sustainable development and CSR

CSR means different things to different companies; for some it has a clear focus on supporting community activities, for others it also embraces environmental responsibilities. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2002) defines CSR as 'The commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life.'

CSR addresses social issues and as such it contributes to the social element of sustainable development. Any business that takes sustainable development seriously will automatically be addressing CSR. Equally, CSR often provides a way in for educators to introduce sustainable development to a company.

Shifting paradigms

Value judgements in the business world are dominated by the single economic bottom line: efforts to introduce the triple bottom line, which incorporates social and environmental costs, are making slow progress. Wessex Water is one company that has incorporated the environmental bottom line: with the help of Forum for the Future it has published accounts for both the single economic bottom line and the environmentally sustainable bottom line (www.wessexwater.co.uk/strikingthebalance/green_accountshtm).

It will take a shift in the economic system to make the triple bottom line the accepted norm in accounting. The concept of fundamental shifts in people's values and in their beliefs about the world around them is far from new. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn (1962) uses the example of the Copernican Revolution, when it became widely accepted that the earth orbits the sun rather than vice versa, to show how one dominant paradigm of thought can eventually give way to another. In *State of the World 2000*, Lester Brown (2000) called for a paradigm shift of similar proportions to the Copernican Revolution, only this time in relation to the dominant view of the economic system.

Is education for sustainability in the business world contributing to this shift and how can we judge? Stephen Sterling (2001) in his book *Sustainable Education* identified three levels of learning, associated with three levels of change. These can be summarised as follows.

- **First order change or learning** – adaptive learning, taking place within accepted boundaries that leaves basic values unexamined and unchanged.

- **Second order change or learning** – critically reflective learning that examines the assumptions of first order learning.
- **Third order change or learning** – transformative learning, this happens when we see things differently and involves a deep awareness of alternative world views and ways of doing things.

If his framework is applied to the examples from the world of business described below, some conclusions can be drawn as to the level of learning taking place and the potential for transformation or paradigm shift.

The business case

Many initiatives designed to introduce sustainable development to the business sector start by making a business case for sustainable development. Examples of this include *To Whose Profit* from WWF and Cable and Wireless (2001) and *The Business Case for Sustainable Development*, a publication from the World Business Council for Sustainable Development for the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development argues that sustainable development produces an improved financial bottom line and supports this by referring to the fact that the Dow Jones Sustainability Index out performed the Dow Jones Global Index over a given period.

This presents an interesting dilemma for education for sustainability. To present sustainable development as having positive benefits within the existing economic paradigm is the best way to engage the interest of the business world in taking sustainable development seriously and yet a transformative education for sustainability is designed to challenge and change the values that support the existing paradigm.

Professional Practice for Sustainable Development (PP4SD)

In the UK there are about 5.5 million people across the public and private sectors who refer to themselves as professionals in their chosen field. PP4SD is a project aimed at delivering education and support materials for continuing professional development in sustainable development. PP4SD is currently being managed by a partnership of the Institute of Environmental Sciences, the Environment Agency, the Natural Step and the RSPB. It has in the past also involved WWF and CEE. The project started by consulting with fourteen professional institutions in diverse fields such as civil engineering, architecture, planning, purchasing and waste management, on the sort of support they required with sustainable development. The result of this consultation was a one-day introductory course on sustainable development that can now be utilised as part of continuing professional development programmes by the various professional institutions. PP4SD advocates a systems approach as the only way to understand the interconnected nature of sustainable development. This is reflected in the

aims and the methodology employed by the project. One of the main aims is to promote inter-professional learning and this has been achieved by bringing the various professions together in workshop sessions to explore sustainable development issues.

A recent PP4SD activity involved the training of the complete cohort of the Barclays Bank graduate recruitment programme. This training of 130 graduates from across Barclays divisions was reported in the Independent newspaper on 25 February 2003 under the heading ‘Corporate citizens take the initiative – New initiatives are introducing graduates to the concept and implementation of sustainable development’. The article went on to say:

As well as teaching citizenship in schools, encouraging students to play an active and positive part in their community, it is equally important to teach and encourage citizenship in adults. Graduates who are just starting on their careers could be the business leaders of the next 20 years, so if they can be taught about the positive impact they can have on the community – local, national and global – this could reap benefits for all of society across many generations. (ibid)

The training was based on the PP4SD Foundation Course developed with the fourteen professional institutions. It introduced the Barclays graduates to the concept of sustainable development, outlined the needs and possibilities for change and demonstrated how sustainable development can be integrated into banking decisions. Jimmy Brannigan, National Learning Manager for the Environment Agency and one of the PP4SD trainers, is quoted in the Independent article as follows.

At the start of the training most of the graduate trainees had an awareness of the issues around sustainable development but were questioning how it was relevant to them working in a bank or felt that they were only one person in the big banking world so what difference could they make? The training helps them to understand what they can do to make a difference both now as a graduate trainee and as they move forward in their careers. (ibid)

Mathew Davis, one of the Barclays graduate trainees, summed-up his experience of the PP4SD training like this. ‘The training really highlighted my responsibility as a corporate citizen. I can work with the people around me to make a real difference.’

The PP4SD programme is designed to provide a systems approach to sustainable development that can be replicated by professionals in a range of continuing professional development contexts. Following the work with Barclays the strategy is to engage the various financial professional bodies including accountants, bankers, actuaries, etc and draw them into cross-professional debate and training. In this way one profession is less likely to take actions that will result in problems for professionals in other fields. The

objective is to shift the individual professional's narrow view of the world towards a more holistic systems perspective.

The PP4SD project has third order change as an aim, but the level of learning currently taking place as a result of the project is second order learning where professionals are reflecting on their own practice in relation to other disciplines. However, the continuing professional development framework and the institutional structures are still being used to deliver the learning. The rolling out of the PP4SD Foundation Course does provide a basis from which third order learning may develop in the future.

The Interface Corporation

The Interface Corporation is a multinational manufacturer of carpets, supplying more than 40% of all new carpet tiles fitted in commercial buildings worldwide. It has 27 manufacturing sites in six countries and retail outlets in 110 countries. (For more information on the company see www.interfaceurope.com)

The Chairman and CEO of Interface, Ray Anderson, launched a vision in 1994 for his company 'to become a leader in industrial ecology, by first becoming a sustainable corporation and eventually a restorative enterprise'. As part of its strategy towards becoming a 'leader in industrial ecology', Interface engaged The Natural Step (TNS), which operates training and consulting services to help organisations to move towards a sustainable future. TNS uses a science-based framework of four principles of sustainability, the fourth of which is meet human needs worldwide. Interface has gone on to develop its own framework, 'the seven fronts to achieving sustainability'. (Information on Interface's journey towards sustainability, including details of the 'seven fronts' can be seen at www.interfacesustainability.com)

To achieve its ambitious goals in sustainability Interface realised that it had to take its entire staff on the same journey, not just the senior managers. It organised training in sustainability for its entire workforce worldwide in an effort to enable them to understand what the corporation was doing and why. In addition it wanted its workforce to take initiatives at shop floor level that would support the drive towards sustainability. Feedback from the workforce in Europe also indicated that many workers took the messages home and introduced changes to their lives outside the workplace.

The seventh front in the Interface framework is 'Redesign commerce – redefining commerce to focus on the delivery of service and value instead of the delivery of material. Encouraging external organisations to create policies and market incentives promoting sustainable practices'. (ibid)

There is little doubt that Interface has ambitions not only to transform itself, but to transform the way people do business at least within its sphere of influence. Again, as with PP4SD, the ambition has not been fully realised to date

and the current activity appears to be second order change, which is laying a basis for the possibility of third level order in the future.

Conclusions

The high profile examples of education for sustainability in the world of business tend to be in the companies that are successful economically and can afford to invest in this form of training. It should not be forgotten that 90% of businesses worldwide are SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises) the vast majority of which see their main priority as economic survival. Sustainable development and education for sustainability are seen as low priorities, although it could be argued that SMEs have the most to gain from a shift towards more sustainable business practices, where economies of scale might count for less and small local producers are more highly valued.

There are clearly some interesting developments in the business world with regard to education for sustainability, but the examples, although high in profile, are still relatively few in number. The level of change is significant in individual cases, but we are still a long way from the paradigm shift called for by Lester Brown. Perhaps it requires a combined approach of confrontation and cooperative engagement to maintain progress. The more the protestors and campaigners can apply pressure on the boardrooms, the more big business will give the educators for sustainability the opportunities to move towards transformative learning and change.

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