Sustainable Education

Stephen Sterling responds to Doug Bourn’s review of his book

I thank Doug Bourn for his review of my book Sustainable Education in the DE Journal vol 8.1, and kind comments on my contribution to the field. I want to offer a brief reply. The problem with short reviews is that by necessity they have to encapsulate and condense ideas and arguments, and by so doing can misconstrue things somewhat. For example, I don’t actually question EE, or DE or ESD per se – I’ve spent the best part of my life defending and advocating these movements after all – but argue that we need to re-assert, and re-examine the idea that they might be seen as precursors of a deeper change of educational culture, which is alternative rather than additional to the managerialism, instrumentalism, modernism – whatever you want to call the paradigm – that currently dominates.

The examples of practice given in the book were not ‘randomly chosen’ but serve to illustrate the possibilities of holistic change at different levels of educational systems, and also, the possibility of different degrees of change. Doug feels it’s a ‘difficult read despite being only 90 pages’ – well, it is because the book is so short that it is necessarily condensed. It had to cover a lot of ground in a set length predetermined by the publishers – (the book is one of a series on aspects of sustainability commissioned by the Schumacher Society). But many other respondents have praised its lucidity and conciseness – for example, one practising teacher (not an academic) wrote, ‘I think it is amazing that you got so much into such a small and very readable book. I have promised to lend it out to workmates who would not normally buy books on sustainability but who have expressed interest in this one.’ I would agree that some of it is challenging – it requires the reader to think, and reflect on his/her own experience and values, and to fill in the inevitable gaps – but that’s not the same as ‘a difficult read’ (or is it?!). Also, the book suggests that some of the simplest questions, such as ‘what is education for?’ are among the most powerful and relevant we can ask, and should continue to ask.

A further criticism from Doug is that the argument is not sufficiently based in current practice. But through my extensive work with WWF, South Bank University and other channels, I am well aware of practice in the area of education for change, and yes, I’ve also have read my Freire, Fals-Borda, Chambers et al. My question is: ‘what do these educational movements and practices for change share at a fundamental level? Can this be better articulated so that they can move more effectively from the margins, to challenge
Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was a United Nations program that defined as education that encourages changes in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to enable a more sustainable and just society for all. ESD aims to empower and equip current and future generations to meet their needs using a balanced and integrated approach to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. ESD is the term most used internationally and by the United Nations. Agenda 21 was Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is simply good quality education which is about what and how people learn and its relevance to today’s world and its global, environmental and social challenges. ESD has spread across all levels and areas of education, in all regions of the world, and is widely considered key in supporting sustainable development. Education for Sustainable Development is a matter for all members of society, starting at the earliest stages in education. Education for Sustainable Development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning; for example, climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, poverty reduction, and sustainable consumption. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods that motivate and empower learners to change their behaviour and take action for sustainable development.
Sustainable Education aims to strengthen and enlarge the sustainable development education at UM, and it wants to provide an overview for everyone who is interested in topics of sustainability. The project team is positioned at the heart of the academic community, and acts as a facilitator within the UM’s sustainability initiative. Sustainable Education seeks to Education for Sustainable Development (EDS) has been recognized as an integral contributor to achieving several SDGs. This has been particularly evident in the fourth SDG, which advocates for: inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong opportunities for all. However, academic institutions have a much broader responsibility and role to play to reach the wide-ranging SDGs. If you skim through the SDGs, you’ll be able to immediately see the section ‘sustainable education and approaches’ welcomes the full range of previously-unpublished scholarly communication indicated within the journal’s aims (https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sustainability/about). Also, in line with this journal’s policy of having no restriction on the overall length of the paper, Section Editors will expect academic communications to be concise, clear and readable.