

## **Educating for Sustainability: Systems and Citizenship vs Me and Consumerism**

**By Ken Webster**

The current framework on educating for sustainability suggests young people should be on the side of the angels, accept their responsibilities and do the right thing. Let's listen to the national drumbeat 'care for yourself, care for others and care for the environment'. Care as a value or attitude and care as an action. What's not to like, about *caring*? To reject it would be to say 'I don't care' and that would be less than human, seeing as we are hard wired for empathy. Caring is also seen as a great way to include agendas around healthy eating and community involvement. Even so it seems a minority of schools are doing well with ESD (or education for sustainability).

One of the findings in Ofsted surveys is that ESD deals with the local better than the global, another that it is often peripheral to school life and confined to extra curricular activities. A third that it is much more likely to be found in primary than secondary school.

**A cursory look through the sorts of actions schools and pupils do get involved in reveals an emphasis on the individual, their mindset and their choices. This is about behavioural change and persuading themselves and others, by example, that this is a good thing. It has sometimes a whiff of piety about it, about joining our club, ranging from resistance to most things industrial and mass produced (especially airplanes it seems) through to moderating the rough edges of an insufficiently caring and sharing society. *Over* consumption, *over* population, *over* industrialised, *over*exploited and declining biodiversity. *Overweight!* It all suggests we are guilty of endless sins and that a great deal less of most of it would be better.**

There are plenty of examples around of doing things differently, intelligently and thoughtfully. And there is plenty of advice... Twenty ways to Go Green etc... After all, the situation, the facts, the evidence is there. So why are we struggling so much and why is ESD so marginal if it is all so obvious? Do the facts matter by themselves? Will the truth set us free? Do people change their minds much at all? Shall we just shout our message louder, employ more sophisticated marketing, wait for the collapse? Is it plain boring?

Here are a few clues:

George Lakoff, the cognitive scientist, argues that most abstract thinking is based on metaphor. A set of interrelated metaphors gives a worldview, a framework. 'Frames' are cognitive circuits that determine how we think about things. 'To be accepted, the truth must fit people's frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off.'

Two from Buckminster Fuller: 'Seek to reform the environment not Man' and 'You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete.'

Lastly, Prof Michael Braungart a leading designer and materials chemist, poked fun at how sustainability can be more 'getting by' than 'doing well'. 'We still have people talking about sustainability...! Nothing is more boring. Are you proud if your marriage is sustainable...? We feel guilty, and cut our hair to use less shampoo. It's guilt management and celebrating mediocrity.' (1)

**The essence of these objections is that worldviews, frameworks for thinking are the gatekeepers when it comes to change. Facts which don't fit a framework have no chance.** Hence for Buckminster Fuller it's basic systems thinking: don't change 'man' change the context in which she operates. What's more effective - changing the rules for manufacturers around the energy efficiency of electric motors for refrigeration units or persuading 30 million users to not 'overcool' their nut outlets?

**Changing people's worldview (a level way more profound than whether to have a blue or red car) is very hard work indeed, and the basis of any chance of success is in offering a framework which makes sense and promises to do a better job.** That's the message from cognitive scientists like Lakoff, (2) and echoed by the second Fuller quote. In general people also don't vote for 'less and less' or riot for austerity. They are labelled fundamentalist if they do. Offering the chance to feel less guilty won't cut it for long either, as Braungart suggests this is more often about mediocrity a lack of ideas, amelioration. That's not a new framework, a model of the best of the possibilities around us (and not even rational when examined closely). Offering harm reduction, and minimising isn't a new framework, its akin to suggesting that poisoning someone more slowly is a big advance. If its all you can get, well, you'll accept it but if change is to be fleet of foot health is certainly more attractive and a great deal more than the absence of pain. Which would you choose?

Offering to force personal behaviour change 'for the good of all' doesn't do it either – the Daily Mail recently headlined “A slop bucket for every home” in response to ideas around cutting waste food by mandating composting. **Even given the deliberate mischief of such newspapers the mainstream is rightly suspicious of being told what is good for it when it looks interfering and disconnected from wider change – and opportunities.**

Add in the increasing tendency over recent decades to 'privatise responsibility', to focus on the individual in the name of more choice and the picture looks a tad more understandable. The illusion of choice presented in the consumer world (and articulated so well by Adam Curtis' BBC series the *Century of Self*) is uncovered as a highly manipulated set of products and services provided by relatively few firms. This illusion has been introduced into health, education and of course environmental matters. Want better health care? Then choose your hospital or school (and the more income you have the better, and woe betide you if you make the wrong choice). Want a good environment then protect yourself (try organic food, CCTV, bottled water, and don't live in the city). Its all about me, because I am worth it, because I no longer believe that there is an 'us' or much other choice, because I am, in a one party democracy, much less a citizen than a consumer and I am fearful. The notion of 'care for yourself, care for others and care for the environment' should be followed by the disclaimer: 'because we (the polity) don't really want that job anymore.'

**The puzzle of why ESD is marginal, associated with sentiment and vague agendas, and has a focus on consumer choices and practical action (rather than ideas) is less difficult to untangle now. It is much more ESD as 'me and consumerism' than 'systems and citizenship' (as in active citizenship, offering to challenge, demand and cajole; as in having some sense of how to describe and debate the outline of a sustainable world.) And if it should be more 'systems and citizenship' then it's about having some tools to get there, to at least get the balance right, some intellectual tools, some *philosophy*. As the**

**Art of War records 'Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.'**(3)

**That is why in the book *Sense and Sustainability* we gathered together for the educational community the basics of what is emerging worldwide as a 'framework for thinking.'** It potentially does what Fuller, Braungart, Lakoff and others insist is necessary: provide a better model, a design philosophy; one that celebrates our presence on the earth, is based around systemic thinking, is capable of rebuilding natural and social capital, and is aspirational. It isn't a solution, its nothing so crude but it is a perspective through which new and varied questions and ideas have been generated.

**The course at Schumacher College in November, *Closing Loops and Opening Minds*, is about moving ESD centre stage by describing and debating some of the ideas which are creating a new and engaging thoroughly modern framework for thinking. Centre stage it is a key to the much vaunted green, low carbon economy, to jobs, increased wellbeing and effective institutional development. The course is the confident next step in ESD.**

Notes

(1) <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/002967.html>

(2) [http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/bios/lakoff.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/bios/lakoff.html)

(3) Chinese General Sun Tzu 6thC BC