

Book review

Sustainability Education – Perspectives and Practice across Higher Education

Paula Jones, David Selby and Stephen Stirling. Earthscan, London, 2010, ISBN, 978-1-84407-878-3 (paperback), £29.99, 364 pp.

This book is extremely interesting, insightful and well written, and an absolute 'must-read' for anyone involved in higher education. It has been put together by the Centre for Sustainable Futures at the University of Plymouth and the UK Higher Education (HE) Academy Education for Sustainability Project (which has the remit of assisting subject communities to develop sustainability-related curricular), and draws upon the contributions from 28 authors. It pulls together a review of some of the most influential literature on the subject in one place, which in itself is a highly valuable resource.

The book has four introductory chapters and 13 chapters that detail experience from different disciplines. This reviewer set out with some scepticism about how much of the book would be relevant to anyone in engineering education as the chapters cover such a diverse array of subject matters and even engineering itself is dealt with in one chapter and not broken down into disciplines. However, the introductory chapters were very impressive and left this reviewer with the desire to read more of the subject-specific chapters. There are interesting insights and experiences throughout that are relevant to any discipline.

The preface outlines the aim of the book: to answer the question about how disciplines can embed sustainability into their theory and practice. It states that there is growing interest in 'greening the curricula' but that a great challenge still remains. The book basically reviews the current state-of-play and points the way to future developments. The authors wish to encourage readers to look outside their disciplines and to appeal to a wide audience: theorists, practitioners, academics, students, policy makers and senior managers. They wish to demonstrate disciplinary potential and benefits from embedding sustainability in terms of staff and student motivation, providing the opportunity for 'doing things differently' and for providing more excitement for all involved.

The foreword to the book sets the thinking described in the rest of the book in context. It sets out the need for transforming our curricula in terms of global imperative and academic moral responsibility. It introduces the idea that disciplinary boundaries are a barrier to true sustainable education, yet overcoming these, together with institutional inertia, are a pervasive and universal problem.

Chapter 1 sets out the international and historical context and the various relevant declarations and agreements that have been set in place. It highlights the 2005 HEFCE consultation document and the response from Peter Knight as the reason for the rather 'hands-off' approach adopted by the funding councils' recommendations for sustainability in the curricula. The chapter goes on to describe some further inhibitors to curricular change and opportunities for overcoming these. Academic freedom and academics' reluctance to be 'told what to think' about any matter, not least

sustainability, is cited as a major inhibitor. These barriers have definite resonance for me, speaking as a person responsible for designing and implementing such curricular change and would be informative reading for any of the book's target audience.

Chapter 2 explores interdisciplinarity and how far it is an inevitable part of sustainability education. It looks back at influential writing on sustainable development and then goes further to state that dealing with issues in single disciplines actually causes unsustainability. It calls for HE to become interdisciplinary, indeed for it to develop new disciplines. It demonstrates some national and international approaches to this and examples of how universities can work together to share best practice. It then develops the reasons why this is not happening, from governance of institutions right through to student attitudes.

As chapter 2 points to new pedagogies as one of the mechanisms for curricula transformation, chapter 3 details what some of these might be. It includes employability skills development, thereby drawing in practitioners as viable readership of the book.

Chapter 4 describes international trends and developments and challenges whether our very westernised assumptions about development and education are one of the biggest barriers to sustainability education, and whether we need to break down some very entrenched routines, structures and practices before progress can be made.

Chapter 5 is the first of the subject-specific chapters which, in general, all provide a discourse on subject-related issues and experiences, and present some state-of-the-art case studies and pedagogies from both the UK and internationally where available. They generally reinforce the arguments presented in the introductory chapters within a discipline-specific context. The most relevant of these to the readership of *Engineering Sustainability* are both the 'Engineering' and 'Built environment' chapters.

Overall, the book certainly achieves the goals as set out at the start. It definitely echoes some experiences encountered by this reviewer and provides insightful and practical solutions to some of the issues faced in the civil engineering profession. Perhaps beyond the scope of this publication, but it would have been beneficial to have seen some synthesis of some of the material into interdisciplinary threads, especially as one of the key messages was the need to break down disciplinary barriers. A significant thread for the readership of *Engineering Sustainability* might have been the different disciplinary lessons and pedagogies for business studies, engineering, the built environment, social work (sustainable communities), earth science and law. It might then have been possible to suggest some pooling of subjects to deliver the skills we need to deliver the sustainable communities strategy in the UK, perhaps hinting at a new 'more sustainable' discipline. There are many of these threads that could be pulled together for different audiences and would form interesting articles for a host of different journals.

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