Vare, Paul ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3182-9105 and Scott, William (2008) Education for Sustainable Development: two sides and an edge. DEA Thinkpiece.

DEA Thinkpiece

Education for Sustainable Development: two sides and an edge

In this thinkpiece, **Paul Vare** and **William Scott**, use the distinction they have made between ESD 1, learning *for* sustainable development, and ESD 2, learning *as* sustainable development, in order to comment on the issue of Fairtrade and the different approaches that might be taken, ie, seeing this as something to promote as a 'good thing', and something to critically explore as a complex and contentious sustainable development issue. They consider the relationship between these approaches and the importance of critical literacy.

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> ### Scene: A remote roadside, Arusha Region, Tanzania
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> Godfrey, was fixing a puncture when a Maasai boy appeared. After exchanging greetings in Swahili (the national language), Godfrey asked the boy, "Why aren't you in school today?"
> He replied, "My father would beat me."
> "He would beat you?"
> "He would; I must tend the cows."
>
> Sensing an anomaly, Godfrey asked, "So how do you know Swahili?"
> "I learned it in school."
> "But you don't go to school!"
> "I went to school. For two years."
> "And your father didn't beat you?"
> "My father sent me. He wants me to know Swahili."

Introduction

While that boy's father may not be in line for 'Teacher of the Year', he was at least trying to equip his son with a deep-rooted sense of how to behave as a Maasai *and* ensure that the boy had a grasp of Swahili, a critical tool for engagement in an unpredictable and potentially hostile society. As far as he was concerned, the one skill without the other was not a sustainable option for his son.

Today, all of us are faced with life in such a society – our own. This is because, with an array of social and environmental crises crowding our headlines, one of the few things we can predict with confidence is that our world will change – unpredictably. Faced with this situation, what is the educational response to be?

DEA, in line with many charities, campaigning organisations and governments, embraces the aims of *education for sustainable development* (ESD). The DEA sees this specifically as 'education for a just and sustainable world.'

We might assume that there is an internationally agreed vision of ESD given that, in 2008, we are three years into the United Nations' Decade for ESD. The UN Decade's implementation plan (UNESCO, 2005) tells us that the Decade:

> "…promotes a set of underlying values… and behavioural outcomes, which should characterize learning in all circumstances."

Some see this as reflecting a 'sustainability literacy' approach (Forum for the Future, 2004) where it appears that there is a broad 'syllabus' of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to be 'delivered'. There is much talk of guiding individuals' decisions using 'carrots and sticks', which, although a basic form of learning, is still learning.

This in turn fits with the received view of sustainable development as being driven by expert-knowledge where the role of the non-expert is to do as guided, with as much grace as can be mustered.

But this is not the whole story; in our view, it is barely half of it. We recognise that sustainable development, if it is going to happen, is going to be *a learning process* – it certainly won't be about 'rolling out' a set of pre-determined behaviours (Scott & Gough, 2003).

Two Sides of Education for Sustainable Development: ESD 1 and ESD 2

As we have outlined earlier (Vare & Scott, 2007), we find it helpful to think of two inter-related and complementary approaches to ESD, which we term ESD 1 and ESD 2. So far we have mentioned only examples of ESD 1, which might be termed *learning **for** sustainable development*.

Familiar activities include raising awareness and 'signposting' goods and services that will reduce our ecological footprint and any negative social impacts arising from our activities. ESD 1 promotes 'positive' behaviours, which can be helpful where the need is clearly identified and agreed. Many of these positive behaviours can confer clear benefits to organisations, families, and individuals as well as wider environmental and social benefits. There are few good arguments, for example, against support for vaccination programmes in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, not every issue is as straightforward as vaccination. If, for example, you think that 'buying Fairtrade' is unproblematic, please read on as we consider ESD 2.

ESD 2 is *learning **as** sustainable development*. It aims to build capacity to think critically about (and beyond) what experts tell us and test sustainable development ideas, exploring the contradictions inherent in trying to do the 'right' thing.

Outcomes of ESD 2 will depend on people's future, unforeseen decisions. This is an open-ended process so we can't measure ESD 2 impacts in terms of pre-determined social or environmental impacts. However, using qualitative research techniques, we can assess the extent to which people have, for example, learned to think more critically or felt empowered and/or motivated to accept more responsibility in different areas of their lives.

ESD 2 involves the development of learners' abilities to make sound choices in the face of the inherent complexity and uncertainty of the future. As Scott and Gough, (2003: 147) note:

> By learning throughout our lives we equip ourselves to choose most advantageously as the future unfolds. This would not bring about sustainable development. Rather, it would be evidence that sustainable development was happening.

From this perspective, sustainable development doesn't just depend on learning; it is inherently a learning process. This leads to radically different definitions, as John Foster (2002) has argued:

> Sustainable development
>
> - *a process of making the emergent future ecologically sound and humanly habitable as it emerges, through the continuous responsive learning which is the human species' most characteristic endowment*
>
> - *a social learning process of improving the human condition*
>
> - *a process which can be continued indefinitely without undermining itself*

This way of thinking about sustainable development encapsulates the core role for learning as a collaborative and reflective process, captures the inter-generational dimension and the idea of environmental limits.

As we have seen above, organisations that promote ESD often see this in terms of 'ESD 1'. This is worrying for two reasons:

(a) people rarely change their behaviour because they are told to do so (indeed, many self-respecting individuals would probably seek to do the opposite), and perhaps more importantly …

(b) too much successful ESD 1 in isolation would *reduce* our capacity to think and manage change ourselves and therefore *make us less sustainable*.

ESD 2 makes ESD 1 meaningful, because our long-term well-being will depend less on our compliance in being trained to do the 'right' thing now, and more on our capability to analyse, to question alternatives and negotiate our decisions in an unforeseeable future.

Together but Apart

In exploring the relationship between ESD 1 and 2 we wish to avoid an *either-or…* debate in favour of a *yes-and…* approach.

We see these two forms as complementary sides of the same ESD coin. Elsewhere (Vare and Scott, 2007) we have suggested that the ancient Chinese concept of Yin and Yang (Fig. 1) is a useful way of looking at this relationship.
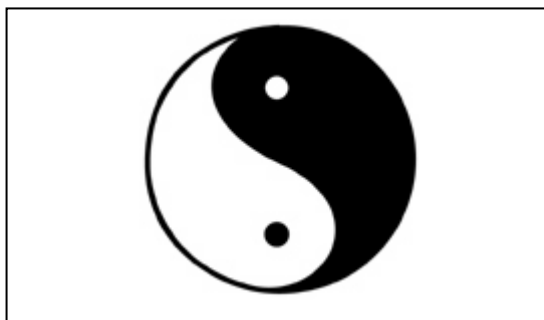
Fig. 1: The Yin-Yang Symbol

The dots within the Yin-Yang symbol represent the view that no phenomenon is completely devoid of its opposite, hence they are not complete opposites. The Yin-Yang concept also suggests that 'opposing' principles consume and support each other and that phenomena change into their opposites in an eternal cycle of reversal.

This would suggest that even as we deliver a strong ESD 1-style programme of pro-environmental learning, ESD 2 is likely to be taking place. We would extend this argument further by suggesting that we *cannot* deliver ESD 1 *or* ESD 2 in isolation.

Faced with a situation where a strong institutional line is being promoted in an effort to make pupils act more sustainably (ESD 1), most self-respecting pupils will simply *learn to survive* the onslaught with or without adopting the required behaviours. Through a process of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) we all 'learn our way' into situations as we take on the identity of students, workers, etc. regardless of what people are trying to 'teach' us. Similarly, students develop their own strategies for surviving school – and that includes ESD programmes.

On the other hand, an open-ended philosophical discussion in the classroom (ESD 2) will need to be *about* something. We cannot learn in a vacuum and so information (the discussion content) and values (perhaps modelled by the teacher / facilitator / institution through the process) are acquired.

And an Edge: the argument in context – Fairtrade

Fairtrade is a popular theme in campaigning organisations and in schools; we now observe a Fairtrade Fortnight every March and buying Fairtrade goods is generally seen as a 'preferred behaviour'. We might see this as ESD 1 in full cry. Surely, if pupils are buying or demanding Fairtrade goods, then that's a job well done, isn't it?

We are, after all, familiar with the argument that, "it doesn't matter *why* they're doing it – the fact that they're doing it at all, and that this will have a positive impact, is enough." But is it? Is there anything 'wrong' with simply advocating on behalf of Fairtrade?

As educationalists who are keen to see that learners are encouraged to think for themselves, weigh arguments and justify their opinions, we are troubled by the idea that they may be encouraged to support Fairtrade as an unquestionably 'good thing'; such education may even be considered unethical. It reduces the role of education from rigorous enquiry and an exploration of the world to a moralising project whose success is measured in terms of a range of prescribed behaviours.

As educationalists who sympathise with DEA's desire for a just and sustainable world, we are again troubled by the idea that pupils may be encouraged to support Fairtrade as an unquestionably 'good thing'; the resolve felt by pupils in the classroom may well be unsustainable in the wider world of the real economy. Support for a position born out of an unproblematic 'sell' of Fairtrade may not be able to withstand persuasive counter-arguments away from the safe haven of the 'sustainable school'.

A pupil who supports Fairtrade in a blind fashion may be ill-equipped to deal with challenges such this one from a right-of-centre view…

> *Fair trade policies can have other disastrous effects… …when (non-governmental organisations) demanded a higher price for bananas to help raise the cost of living for the Guatemalan banana producer, banana companies ended up leaving and relocating to Ecuador, where wages were lower.* (Bindal & Johnson, 2008)

… or this one from a 'deep green' perspective:

> *Rather than encouraging (indigenous peoples) to be tied into the market economy controlled by foreign companies, people should be supporting their freedom to control their own land and resources and therefore their future.* (Greenpeace)

An ESD 2 approach would make good use of such perspectives; far from being obstructive, they provide promising starting points. Many pupils (probably the majority in secondary schools) don't want to be told what to think and how to behave by their teachers. Anyway, tackling these alternative perspectives offers a far more stimulating way of engaging students' interest, and enhancing their motivation (Scott, 2008) than merely asserting why (or that) Fairtrade is 'the answer'. None of this, of course, means that Fairtrade produce cannot be made available within the school; rather, it means that this availability is a direct stimulus to an exploration of the issues surrounding it.

Taking on the challenges *to* Fairtrade provides a context in which to explore a range of themes, such as entrepreneurship, economics, international trade, marketing and environmental protection. Fairtrade also offers an alternative perspective to the 'factual' accounts of these mainstream themes.

A brief critique of the Fairtrade coffee market (Larrivee, 2005) provides a clear explanation of the process that has served the British economy so well:

> *Difference between input price and output price doesn't inherently imply injustice... the question is not the difference between what different parties to the production get paid, but rather who adds value, how much, and where.*

There remains the question of who profits by 'adding value' and by how much. It's clear that the world doesn't simply comprise Fairtrade 'goodies' and conventionally trading 'baddies'; most people are trying to make an honest living.

This can be illustrated by a simple shopping activity with plastic money found in any Key Stage 1 classroom. By Key Stage 2 the same materials could be augmented by a second (and then third) link in the chain supplying the shop before selling to end consumers. A simple tally of plastic coins can illustrate where the money is being made – and where it isn't. There is the likelihood of course that, as we distribute benefits proportionately for Fairtraded and non-Fairtrade goods, we may discover that the greatest beneficiary of the Fairtrade label is the shopkeeper (i.e. our own supermarkets). Should our pupils not know this, and have the chance to ask whether this can be justified?

In an article for 'The Observer, Food Monthly', Andrew Purvis (2006) points out that:

> *At least under the Fairtrade system, it is consumers in the north who are being exploited, not impoverished farmers.*

This is because Fairtrade is traditionally focused on cash crops rather than finished products, the rewards of adding value are generally reaped in the wealthy North. But that's cold comfort for those hardest hit by rising prices at home, e.g. families with young children. So, do we give up on Fairtrade? Pupils might wish to ponder the question raised by Philip Oppenheim in his article attacking the 'Fat Cats of Fairtrade':

> *"…should I pay up to 80p more for my bananas when only 5p will end up with the grower; or should I just buy the regular ones and give the difference to a decent development charity?" (Oppenheim, 2005)*

There are alternatives to Fairtrade of course. Labelling schemes range from the little red tractor (home grown, so fewer food miles) to organic certification (apparently healthier and wildlife friendly) to the Rainforest Alliance's green frog (certifying that money reaches the farmer rather than a farmers' co-operative). To the teacher, this presents a wonderful (ESD 2) opportunity for an exercise in values identification.

One scheme that focuses on the need for 'added value' in international trade is Equitrade. Their website explains that Equitrade aims to "end poverty through sustainable commercial international trade" by dealing in finished or part-finished products and campaigning to remove trade barriers from poor nations to rich nations.

Their model is applied to imported chocolate from Madagascar where the economic benefit to the people of Madagascar could be twenty times that of the Fairtrade model (Purvis, 2006).

If Equitrade products are hard to come by, we can always make enquiries regarding the fair trade credentials of our favourite suppliers. Taylors of Harrogate asks tea farmers to detail their costs and pays them 'a fair and sustainable price which may work out well above the Fairtrade price' (Purvis, 2006). For the benefit of West Country readers, Miles of Porlock have a similar policy, preferring to pass benefits onto farmers directly rather than pay the high certification costs for the Fairtrade label (Miles executive *personal communication*).

We may feel frustrated that it is so difficult to do the 'right thing'. But this is the key point: doing the 'right thing' is not simple – life on Earth is a richly interconnected web and trade itself offers a powerful, if simplified, example of the complexity, uncertainty and risk that is characteristic of life on Earth.

Apparently straightforward solutions have unforeseen consequences. Vietnam's efforts to pay a fair price to small coffee producers led to over-production that contributed to a slump in world coffee prices in 2002. Farmers who planted coffee instead of food found market prices covering only 60% of their production costs and were forced into poverty (BBC, 2002). Although not strictly a Fairtrade issue, the situation was cited in a tirade against Fairtrade on an American college website this year (Bindal & Johnson, 2008).

Having delved into the arguments for and against Fairtrade, one of us feels that, on balance, buying Fairtrade is likely to be better than buying non-Fairtraded goods (the other is not so sure, but does actually regularly do so); we both suspect, however, that many students may have a similar spread of opinion. But to start out by presenting our own analysis and conclusions to our pupils would be to miss the point – we arrived at (i.e., learned) our views *ourselves by thinking and deliberating about it*.

This is 'learning as participation' (Vare, 2007) where the very act of engagement in a process causes us to internalise our own view of it. Although learning is enhanced, we cannot (*should* not) expect to control where this engagement will lead in terms of pupil action beyond the classroom. This may still be acceptable to Harriet Lamb, Director of the Fairtrade Foundation, who recognises that Fairtrade is not the answer to all the world's problems but who aims:

> *…to create a situation where it is no longer acceptable to do nothing, where every company, and every individual, has to do something to make the world fairer.'* (Quoted in Purvis, 2006)

The challenge for any values-driven educator is not to force this process. If, as such a teacher, you think you know what the answer is (or ought to be), and feel it your role

to convince your pupils of this, we would politely suggest you follow an alternative career in marketing.

It's clear to us that to investigate the issue of Fairtrade we need to gather a good deal of information and present alternative arguments. We would see this as ESD 1. In order to reach a considered position on Fairtrade we need the opportunity to marshal the evidence on both (or many) sides and think hard about who is saying what and why – and decide what *we* think – at least for the time being. This we would see as ESD 2.

And Finally

For us,

> **ESD 1** opens our eyes to a world of facts, processes, arguments and connections; in developing our skills of reading the world, it provides the text;

in this, it is rather like Andy Stables' (1998, 2001) take on *functional* and *cultural* literacies. Whereas,

> **ESD 2** helps us to read and understand that text. It develops in pupils the skills, self-confidence, knowledge and motivation to be effective learners throughout their lives, and gives them the wherewithal to take action;

which maps well onto Stables' idea of *critical* literacy which is essential if meaningful change is to take place.   Crucially, we think that ESD 1 and ESD2 are each meaning*less* without the other. After all, who would attempt to rear cows in Tanzania these days without learning some Swahili?

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