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# Heartwood

Voices from environmental  
education: *Academic research  
meets head, heart and hands*

Editors: Melissa Glackin, Shirin Hine, Sophie Perry

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# Reflections on organisations from an academic's perspective

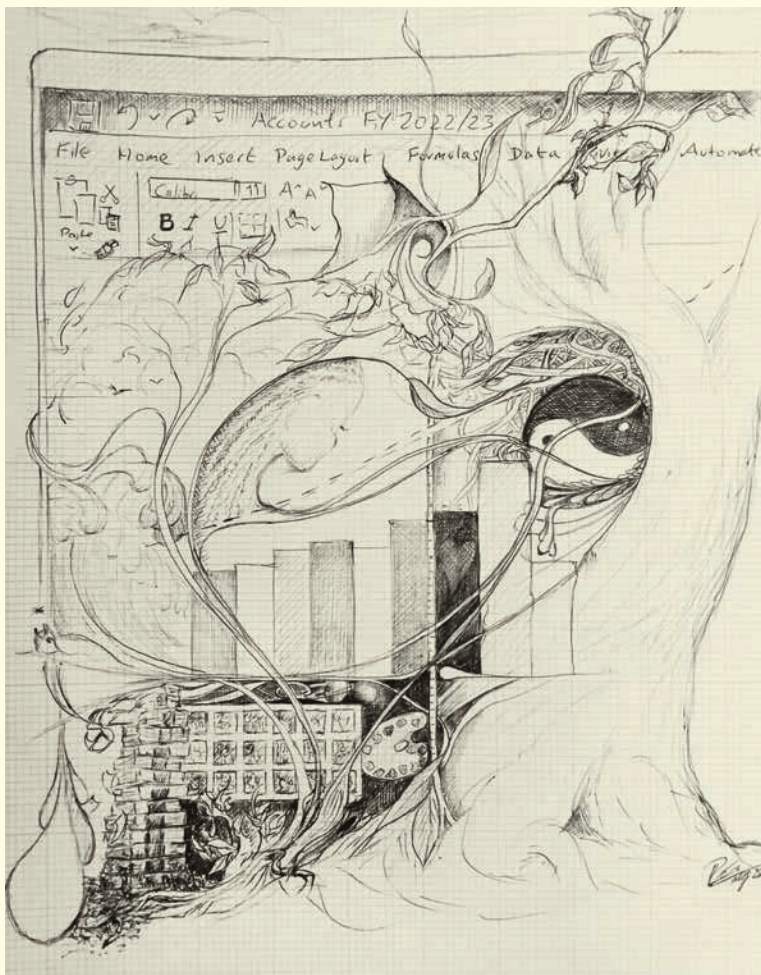
BY PAUL VARE

Paul's various roles have always focused on learning and sustainability. After brief stints teaching, he turned to community development in East Africa. He helped draft the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and worked subsequently on UNECE's ESD indicators and competences for educators. Today he serves as Academic Advisor to the UNECE Steering Committee on ESD, is a Trustee of the National Association for Environmental Education and a member of the Adult Advisory Board of the youth campaign *Teach the Future*. In his day job Paul leads ESD-related research projects and runs the EdD programme at the University of Gloucestershire.

The two chapters in this section appear to be pursuing the same goal – an organisation that takes the multiple ecological crises seriously and which helps all members of society to consider their response to these. Beyond their shared goal, the chapters come from different angles. Angelina feels that we are not doing enough of one thing while Sophie's concern is that we are doing too much of everything else. This can present a double bind; we need more Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) while simultaneously relieving the burdens of the performative culture that characterises many of our institutions. On reflection, perhaps one chapter holds the seed of a solution for the other.

This is reminiscent of the two-sided concept of ESD 1 and ESD 2,<sup>1</sup> where ESD 1 is about learning *for* sustainability; as Angelina suggests, it “supports the teaching and practice needed to create positive social change”. ESD 2, meanwhile, recognises that such efforts tend to “exist within societal norms”, as Sophie reminds us; it interrogates those norms rigorously, asking if this is the best we can do. ESD 2 is learning our way forward or learning *as* sustainability. This is not an either-or situation; rather, ESD 1 and 2 are two sides of a whole, turning in a Yin and Yang relationship.





As I work in a university, I can say a little about these institutions. Universities, like all organisations, face sector-specific challenges. One of these is that their core business is conducted by people who tend to be fiercely protective of their academic freedom. Instructing academics to incorporate ESD can be a fraught business, although less so nowadays as the seriousness of our predicament becomes more widely understood. Academic freedoms also have their limits; they are tolerated insofar as they help to register performance against an array of metrics used

“We need to play the game... Yet ‘the game’ also exemplifies the problem.”

to track inputs, outputs, impacts and other pre-defined outcomes. Performance equates to money and, green prizes aside, there is only one bottom line. Regardless of the size of the institution, the chief concern of the neoliberal university is that we are all singing from the same spreadsheet.

On the one hand we need to play the game, and there are plenty of extrinsic drivers to support this, from the People and Planet league table to the Green Gown Awards. Yet ‘the game’ also exemplifies the problem; for example, it can reward those who pursue corporate (and self-) interest over those of their colleagues. Universities do, however, provide a source of hope as seedbeds of critical thinking. This may not solve the double bind completely; after all, if we push too hard, our careers are on the line. But push we must, for there are always cracks of possibility. Wicked or intractable problems might be resolved, if never solved; the Yin-Yang melding of ESD 1 and 2 is a process not an event.

Angelina stresses the potential of universities to change society, yet the relationship is reciprocal. If society is shifting towards more sustainable modes of development, then the purpose of universities – and education at all levels – will shift too. Currently in England, we are overdue for a swing of the pendulum. Bizarrely, the Government measures the *quality* of higher education courses by tracking the status of jobs and the income secured by their alumni<sup>i</sup>. You are what you earn, not what you learn. For the sake of all our futures, our task must surely be to work towards the day when a key question asked of any student project (and of their future employment) will be the extent to which they contribute to a regenerative society. The same might be said for any organisation.

A legitimate response to Sophie’s workload concerns might be to develop criteria for contributing to the quality of life and/or life on Earth rather than simply making more money. Learning to do a little less may yet become a crucial skill for life, allowing ourselves time to stop, to listen to each other and, collectively to learn our way forward. <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> This is part of the Projected Completion and Employment from Entrant Data (PROCEED) that HEIs are expected to report to Government.

<sup>ii</sup> Vare, P., & Scott, W. (2007). Learning for a Change: Exploring the relationship between education and sustainable development. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 1(2), pp.191-198.