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A Rounder Sense of Purpose: How Education for Sustainable Development Enriches Technical and Vocational Education

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Thank you to the organisers and hosts of this event.

Firstly I should say that I am not here to extol the virtues of the UK's strategy for technical and vocational education in general. In the UK this is an area that is popularly known as the *Cinderella sector of education*, that is, the one that is always left behind in favour of her richer sisters, i.e. school and higher education.

That said, in the years when I worked within the sector, I found it populated by people with great skill, commitment and creativity – or maybe they had to be that way precisely because the sector was so poorly resourced!

Today I would like to share with you two projects or experiences, firstly, a competence framework in education for sustainable development (ESD) that is designed for educators working in *any* sector and with any age group (I must do that because that is why I've been invited to this event). Secondly, I would like to share an approach that I worked on over a decade ago. We called it Smart Business Thinking and it attempted to build ESD into work-based learning. That was when I was working full time for a TVET networking organisation in South-west England. The idea proved popular with trainers in a number of different commercial sectors and, given the focus of this workshop, it seems appropriate to at least mention this approach.

I should also say a few words about my own background; I started out as a teacher but then, over thirty years ago, I took a job with the title 'Education Conservation Officer'. When I was told I had the job I still wasn't sure about what it was exactly but I remember calling my mother to say I had a new job and it what I was going to do for the rest of my life. Since then I have worked in environmental education and subsequently education for sustainable development with learners at all levels of education from kindergarten to post-doctorate, with the voluntary, public and private sector, in a range of social settings from local community level to the United Nations and in every continent except Antarctica. I first engaged with a UNECE expert group in 2002, drafting a Ministerial Statement on ESD for the 2003 Environment for Europe conference in Kiev. Thereafter I served in the drafting group of the UNECE Strategy for ESD, the expert group on ESD indicators and finally the ESD competence expert group. Over those years I was the NGO representative, working for the NGO coalition, European ECO Forum. These days, after years of activism, I'm learning to be an academic.

* * * * *

I will start with my last slide. It's a patch of ground beneath a coppiced tree. White hail stones lie on the ground, they are thicker on either side of the tree because in the middle is where I sat sheltering from the hailstorm. It was already difficult to see this space and I took this picture quickly because the sun had come out and within minutes there would be no sign of the hail, or of where I had been. And that's my point. In the great scheme of things, none of us are here for very long and in the blink of an eye, all trace of our existence is lost. Whether we handle this realisation through our religious beliefs or through a daily act of denial, the realisation remains. We don't have long so let's make our brief stay for good.

So, why the name 'A Rounder Sense of Purpose?' Over recent decades, education policy has been preoccupied with economic growth while paying insufficient heed to global sustainability challenges. Our project sought to reclaim the wider or rounder purposes of education. Most, if not all, educators understand that education is more than can ever be expressed in any given syllabus. There is a 'hidden curriculum' in play within any institution and of course the social purposes of education extend well beyond any given role or industrial sector. To these purposes we should add environmental concerns. Maybe too late in the day, we are all becoming keenly aware of the crisis facing our biodiversity, our land, air and water and, of course, our climate. We are also increasingly aware that there is no such thing as a purely social or environmental or economic issue – all are interrelated; a set of relationships that we sum up in the term 'sustainable development'.

[Slides of SDGs and a 'nested system' approach showing the four environmental goals supporting the social SDGs and then the economic ones.]

International initiatives to promote ESD have been hampered by a lack of clarity on how to implement this form of education. To address this concern A Rounder Sense of Purpose (RSP) began as a three-year project that set out to develop a practical accreditation model for educators working on ESD.

The first phase of RSP ran for three years between 2015 and 2018. Funded under the European Union Erasmus+ programme, the project partners were: University of Gloucestershire (UK), Frederick University (Cyprus), the Hungarian Research Teachers' Association, the Italian Association for Sustainability Science, Duurzame PABO (The Netherlands) and Tallinn University (Estonia).

As a starting point the project used the UNECE framework of ESD competences for educators, which represents a significant attempt to identify competences in a systematic and comprehensive manner. However most of the RSP partners had attempted to implement the UNECE framework but were frustrated because the competences were often abstract and not assessable while the total number (39) was simply unmanageable.

This project therefore set about 'distilling' the UNECE educator competences for Education for Sustainable Development to create a more concise framework of assessable learning outcomes that can form the basis of Education for Sustainable Development qualifications for in-service and student educators across Europe.

This distillation process involved a careful reading of the UNECE framework, matching statements that appeared to cover similar learning outcomes and reformulating them so that statements could be combined and that some form of assessment would be feasible. Gaps were also identified as the UNECE competences were compared with other sustainable development and ESD competences frameworks [Slide refers to Sleurs 2008; Roorda, 2012; Wiek et al., 2015). Even at this early stage, the opinions of teachers and experts were sought within the partner countries, often through several cycles. The resulting framework was then validated using the Delphi technique to refine the framework through rounds of iterative discussion and implementation. In all, over 500 educators and student educators were trained using the RSP framework.

The RSP framework itself comprises 12 competences that can be presented in a 3x4 matrix arranged under the same three column headings as the UNECE model: *holistic approach*, *envisioning change* and *achieving transformation*.

[Slide showing the matrix of competences]

The competences themselves are:

Under *holistic approach*:

- **Systems** – helping learners to see that everything is connected and how this impacts our lives
- **Attentiveness** – researching issues to discover their importance, impact and possibilities for change
- **Transdisciplinarity** – working together with people from different backgrounds
- **Criticality** – asking why things are as they are, checking sources, recognising perspectives

Under *envisioning change*:

- **Futures** – imagining different possibilities for the future and describing their consequences
- **Empathy** – understanding the centrality of emotions to learning; seeing situations as others do
- **Innovation** – considering new ideas while learning from the past
- **Responsibility** – being personally responsible and transparent in how we work

Under *achieving transformation*:

- **Participation** – collaborating with others to improve the places where we live and work
- **Engagement** – working from ‘who I am’ recognising my values and those held by others
- **Action** – developing agency through involvement in meaningful, community-based change projects
- **Decisiveness** – acting in good time, even when faced with dilemmas or situations of uncertainty.

[NB I will use slides to explore some of the issues behind these competences.]

Each competence has three learning outcomes plus a number of underpinning components that help to illustrate what each competence actually involves. Behind all this, on the project website, there are background papers (for academics) and a number of teaching activities for practitioners.

In terms of levels of assessment, the partnership agreed on three levels:

Level 1 – The educator uses the competence effectively and experiments with care in familiar contexts

Level 2 – The educator reflects on the competence and is able to use it in new contexts, to face new challenges and adapt or invent new tools to better exercise the competence

Level 3 – The educator has mastery of the competence while simultaneously understanding that it is necessary to continue to improve it; they promote the competence among collaborators and can guide a shared path of training, innovation, and critical reflection on the competence and good practices associated with it.

During the testing phase, partners noted how the competences could not be isolated in the manner suggested by the table format; as one Dutch teacher attending an RSP training programme observed:

“As soon as you start to teach one of the competences, you inevitably touch on the other eleven.”

The idea of an artist’s palette [slide] was suggested as a means of illustrating the fluid and flexible nature of competences while suggesting that they might be combined by the educator in creative ways depending on their context.

The RSP framework has already been used in a number of settings; in Hungary the competences are being embedded in the national CPD framework for teachers while a regional environment protection agency in Italy has adopted the framework for training its educators. It has been introduced in negotiations with the Dutch Government although the outcome of this process has yet to be seen.

Further work is required in testing and refining the RSP framework, particularly in the area of assessment, although research into this had promising results and has already been published (refer to Vare 2018). In 2018 a second three-year phase (RSP II) began, again with European Union funding. This has widened the partnership to include German, Spanish and Swiss (French- speaking) partners.

Having developed the RSP framework with over 500 educators, we are now keen to apply it in as many settings as possible; why not TVET?

Applying ESD to sector skills

First let’s consider different dimensions of ESD: card sorting exercise here.

[Slide on ESD 1 and ESD 2]

This brings me to the work I have done in the past in the TVET sector in the UK. Sustainable development is essentially a learning process; it has been described by the British environmental philosopher, John Foster, as ‘learning our way forward’. With this in mind, I was interested to see what learning our way forward might look like in the field of work-based learning in a small business setting. Small to medium enterprises (SMEs) often work to tight margins, life is a struggle for survival and they have little time for frills and little extras. What could ESD offer this sector?

We set about exploring just how small businesses trained their staff – or how they didn’t. It was interesting to see how, despite years of educational, pedagogical research, on-the-job training still looked like a man (usually) sitting young people down and telling them what to do, i.e. how they themselves were trained in the past. This activity was most often supported with time and money by the business without being fully integrated into the business plan.

By working closely with a small number of businesses we developed with them what became known as a Smart Business Improvement Plan. It was ‘smart’ because it did more than one thing at the same time; it included the company’s learning plan, which had emerged from a SWOT analysis of the business and its objectives.

[Slides showing these]

Learning wasn't to be confined to episodes of formal training, rather it would be supported daily through a process called Smart Business Coaching. This required reorienting the staff responsible for learning from being simply trainers to becoming coaches, i.e. facilitators of learning. Integral to this process was a consideration of all the connections that people had with each other, with the company and with the wider community. This was a learner centred introduction to systems thinking. We also ran exercises in values clarification. This was a harder sell to some training providers but once they understood that people are far more motivated by what they value rather than what they know, they got the idea. (It's no surprise that empathy became a core competence in the RSP framework.) In this way wider social and environmental considerations became part of the conversation. The whole package was called Smart Business Thinking and a wide range of companies and training providers found it to be a valuable complement to their existing activity.

If we didn't reorient the companies themselves, we certainly gave their trainers and thus their employees a rounder sense of purpose in their work.

This brings me back to the RSP framework. Before closing I should really go back to an earlier comment regarding the environmental crises that we face.

[Slides of Mauna Loa observatory, the world's oldest continuous CO₂ monitoring station run by NOAA (the USA's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and the now famous graph showing increasing ppm of carbon in the atmosphere.]

For many, the time for the UN vision of sustainable development has passed – it's too late. Whatever we do now, the Earth's systems have already been pushed beyond the point of no return and the warming climate is, right now, through positive feedback mechanisms such as the massive release of methane from the tundra and from the methane clathrates on the ocean floor, taking us into an unprecedented period of warming that is destabilising our climate to such an extent that it threatens our agricultural systems and thus humanity itself. What, as educators, do we have to say in the face of such an existential crisis?

In his now famous paper on this situation, Professor Jem Bendell suggests an approach that he calls Deep Adaptation. This comprises the four 'R's:

- Resilience – “the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances so as to survive with valued norms and behaviours”
- Relinquishment – “letting go of certain assets, behaviours and beliefs where retaining them could make matters worse.”
- Restoration – “rediscovering attitudes and approaches to life” (that our current development model has eroded)
- Reconciliation – “with one's own death, with difficulties in one's life (such as anger) and between peoples.

It seems to boil down to love; something that can also be an answer when faced with unruly pupils or students who don't seem to want to learn. Once we learn to love them – and they can make themselves profoundly unlovable at times – we are well on the way to winning them over.

And what do people do when faced with their own extinction? Interestingly, one writer noted how, in 9/11, when people were trapped high in the burning twin towers of the World Trade Centre, they all did one thing, they called their loved ones to tell them they loved them. As the writer, Ian McEwan, put it: "There is only love, and then oblivion."

While discussing this with a mental health practitioner in the UK, we noted how, at its core, the RSP framework could be helpful in addressing mental health issues. This is of particular relevance at a time when environmental indicators point to the high likelihood of societal collapse in the near future. This is because at its core the framework highlights:

- i) A critical awareness of connections – personal, professional, environmental – and how to nurture these
- ii) A positive vision of one's future – developing one's sense of agency in achieving this
- iii) The importance of *doing* something (in concert with others as far as possible) – even if it seems futile!

Whatever the future holds, we all have a responsibility to do what we can for ourselves and for each other and for our home. Don't be put off by not having a long time to act.

To return to that slide of the hail stones beneath the tree... None of us have very long on this Earth. We can choose to ignore the possibilities for creating a better world, to carry on with unsustainable-business-as-usual, or we can choose to learn, to act, to love.

Thank you.

NB The framework, learning outcomes, teaching activities and further reading are all available on the project website: www.aroundersenseofpurpose.eu

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PV
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