

Book review

Shephard, K. (2015). *Higher Education for Sustainable Development*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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The key message of this book is that in order to promote sustainability through the higher education curriculum, we should stop working for transformation but instead do what we currently do – better. The arguments are based upon grounded theory research with university colleagues in “six universities, in five different countries, in three continents, in both hemispheres” (Shephard, 2015, p.22). Shephard describes the “jigsaw” which emerged from his research, whose pieces include HE practitioners who advocate for sustainability – they should continue to do so, openly. However, sustainability education cannot be imposed on all practitioners. Shephard advocates:

“....university teachers should teach passionately according to their own conscience, but in the process focus on helping their students become independent and critical thinkers. Academic developers should help university teachers better understand both how to encourage independent and critical thinking, and higher education pedagogy. University administrators and policymakers should support all university teachers and academic developers to do what they want to do, but ensure that change is monitored and evaluated.”

(Shephard, 2015, p.49-50).

Basically the argument is that, as independent and critical thinkers, students will work out the sustainability messages for themselves. Shephard goes on to assert that this is much more likely to happen through multidisciplinary study and community education.

Shephard’s conclusion that, rather than impose an unwelcome agenda on HE, the focus should instead be on promoting quality learning and teaching, has links to the conclusions of research into fostering employability within HE back in 2003 (Knight, 2003; Knight and Yorke, 2003). Similarly, in relation to this cross-curricular theme, it was argued that if we promote good quality learning, teaching and assessment practices, students are more likely to become critically reflective practitioners who are, in this case, resilient within the labour market.

In the Introduction, Shephard states that he set out with the intention of writing a research paper “destined for very few specialist readers” and that this “evolved into a book” (Shephard, 2015, p.6). Hence this work does contain elements of an academic paper, for example each chapter starts with a (very useful) abstract and ends with references. To adapt this work for “a much broader readership” (ibid), Shephard has attempted to make it more inclusive. A number of linguistic approaches are used to achieve this, including the use of the first person, abbreviations, split infinitives and even a little self-disclosure. This could

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make the book more readable or a little irritating, depending on your views on academic writing. More usefully perhaps, Shephard includes easily understood explanations of a number of key terms, and in particular an accessible account of the grounded theory approach. As an aside, the latter could be useful material to use with students as an example on a research methods course – with the “hidden agenda” of raising their awareness of sustainability.

The book consists of an introduction followed by seven chapters, split into two parts. Part one (chapters one to three) sets out Shephard’s grounded theory. Chapter one sets the scene, outlining the aspirations of HE in relation to sustainability education (including a helpful table summarising Agenda 21, the Talloires Declaration and the Brundtland Report), the barriers to achieving these, and the lack of progress – providing a rationale for Shephard’s research. Chapter two elaborates the research methods and the key themes which emerged, and chapter three builds on this by developing the “jigsaw pieces” and showing how they fit together, ending with the key message of the book.

Part two provides the theoretical underpinning of the jigsaw and suggests how it might be implemented. In chapter four, there is a focus on educational theory, concentrating initially on the affective outcomes of sustainability education and the blurry boundary between cognitive and affective outcomes. Useful definitions of critical thinking, critical reflection and ethical reasoning are elucidated. Fundamentally the conclusion is that graduates with a grounding in the latter three areas will be well-equipped to make decisions about sustainability, illustrated by the fictitious interaction between “Larry” and somewhat-too-good-to-be-true “Sally”. Chapter five examines values education, comparing the teaching of academic integrity, professional values and education for sustainability, and concluding that graduates will be supported by colleagues and society in relation to the two former, but not necessarily in relation to sustainability values. Chapter six explores the assessment, evaluation, monitoring and research into impact of education for sustainability, including a brief but refreshing visit to a fictitious university where Shephard’s approach has been implemented, and an explanation of the New Environmental Paradigm scale.

Chapter seven is a summary of the entire book in the form of a drama, which is a conversation between the Vice Chancellor of the “University of Somewhere Interesting”, the University Leadership Team and the “Sustainability Person”. I actually found this quite amusing, and I feel sure that I have met some of the people from the fictitious leadership team (for example, the one who says there is no room on the curriculum for sustainability, and the one who says ignore it and it will go away). Cunningly, this chapter also illustrates how an advocate for Shephard’s approach to promoting sustainability in HE might meet some of the counter arguments. Possibly you could just skip the entire book and only read this chapter – but perhaps it would not make sense without the preceding arguments.

Shephard describes the intended audience on pages 6-9, concluding that the book would be relevant to anyone remotely linked to HE; I would agree that, in particular, it should be read by sustainability sceptics and advocates alike, including lecturers, educational developers and policy makers. It is not easy to “dip” into, so if you are more of a dipper maybe just read chapter seven; however, at 127 pages it is not too daunting for the busy professional.

The author may be a little self-deprecating at times, there may be scope for the research methodology to be more consistent, and the purist might criticise the migration in terminology used to describe sustainability education – or is it education for sustainable

development? Overall however, this book presents a pragmatic solution to the challenges of education for sustainability, and perhaps has relevance to the development of other cross curricular themes in HE. It is informed by research with HE practitioners, underpinned by previous research with students, and educational theory is used to develop learning and teaching strategies to implement the findings. It is a valuable addition to the literature on sustainability in HE and provides refreshing and workable strategies to move forward.

References

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