

# Sustainable Education

**Stephen Sterling** responds to Doug Bourn's review of his book

I thank Doug Bourn for his review of my book *Sustainable Education* in the DE Journal vol 8.1, and kind comments on my contribution to the field. I want to offer a brief reply. The problem with short reviews is that by necessity they have to encapsulate and condense ideas and arguments, and by so doing can misconstrue things somewhat. For example, I don't actually question EE, or DE or ESD *per se* – I've spent the best part of my life defending and advocating these movements after all – but argue that we need to re-assert, and re-examine the idea that they might be seen as precursors of a deeper change of educational culture, which is alternative rather than additional to the managerialism, instrumentalism, modernism – whatever you want to call the paradigm – that currently dominates.

The examples of practice given in the book were not 'randomly chosen' but serve to illustrate the possibilities of holistic change at different levels of educational systems, and also, the possibility of different degrees of change. Doug feels it's a 'difficult read despite being only 90 pages' – well, it is because the book is so short that it is necessarily condensed. It had to cover a lot of ground in a set length predetermined by the publishers – (the book is one of a series on aspects of sustainability commissioned by the Schumacher Society). But many other respondents have praised its lucidity and conciseness – for example, one practising teacher (not an academic) wrote, 'I think it is amazing that you got so much into such a small and very readable book. I have promised to lend it out to workmates who would not normally buy books on sustainability but who have expressed interest in this one.' I would agree that some of it is challenging – it requires the reader to think, and reflect on his/her own experience and values, and to fill in the inevitable gaps – but that's not the same as 'a difficult read' (or is it?!). Also, the book suggests that some of the simplest questions, such as 'what is education for?' are among the most powerful and relevant we can ask, and should continue to ask.

A further criticism from Doug is that the argument is not sufficiently based in current practice. But through my extensive work with WWF, South Bank University and other channels, I am well aware of practice in the area of education for change, and yes, I've also have read my Freire, Fals-Borda, Chambers *et al.* My question is: 'what do these educational movements and practices for change share at a fundamental level? Can this be better articulated so that they can move more effectively from the margins, to challenge

and help reorient mainstream thinking in education and learning – given the recognised lack of significant progress since Agenda 21?' Yes, the exemplars in the book are based more on the environmental side of things, but what I am suggesting is that deeper ideas which are now emerging about the nature of learning, participation, sustainability, and uncertainty do now give us all a coherent and integrative, if still emerging, platform to present an alternative to the narrowly-based, mechanistic conception of education which still largely reigns. I interpret this alternative paradigm using broadly 'ecological', that is, 'relational' or systemic ideas, but accept that the same thing can be approached or described using a different lexicon. It is one which builds on, rather than rejects, the liberal humanist tradition. In his review, Doug recounts rather than engages with some of these ideas, which I strongly believe are supportive of the work that the DEA and its members represent.

The shift of thinking that I both detect and argue for is, paradoxically, a basis for the pluralism and diversity that Doug supports, but I also recognise that 'the sustainability transition' inevitably requires a quality of 'deep learning'. However, the book does not suggest that transformative learning is something that is achieved overnight but is worked towards, starting (famously) from 'where we are'. To this extent, the book is based in current practice but it does offer, support and encourage a broader vision.

Doug acknowledges the need for a different paradigm, and he also calls for 'a framework which moves forward at a practicable level' but says very little about either. I agree on both counts, and offer the book as a concise starting point on both these objectives, a set of thinking and action tools which people working at all levels of education, formal or non-formal, can test their own beliefs, ideas and practices against – and build from, if they so choose. It's supposed to be a thought-provoking contribution and I certainly accept it may not suit everybody. But judging from the reaction so far, from professors of education to lecturers to teachers, many people are finding it useful – and that's what counts. Oh, and it's cheap!

Sterling, S (2001) *Sustainable Education – Re-Visioning Learning and Change*, Green Books/Schumacher Society, £5.00, ISBN 1 870098 99 4

Sustainable Education aims to strengthen and enlarge the sustainable development education at UM, and it wants to provide an overview for everyone who is interested in topics of sustainability. The project team is positioned at the heart of the academic community, and acts as a facilitator within the UM's sustainability initiative. Sustainable Education seeks to