

The fierce urgency of now? Navigating paradoxes in sustainability education

This special section of the IJSHE brings together five papers originally presented at the fifth sustainability in higher education (SHE) conference, “The fierce urgency of now? Navigating Paradoxes in Sustainability Education,” hosted by Canterbury Christ Church, UK, in May 2020. Challenged by the words of Greta Thunberg spoken at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019, our aim was to provide a space to explore the role and responsibility of universities in a time of global crisis and to explore what it means to act as “*if our house is on fire*”. And then the Covid-19 pandemic struck [. . .] and the focus we had planned took on new relevance. Under lockdown conditions, the conference (and HE more generally) had to move to an online format, and we all found ourselves working in uncharted territory. Although challenging, this opened up unexpected opportunities for colleagues and students from different institutions nationally and internationally to participate, increasing diversity and repositioning the SHE networks as more outward-facing. This apparent contradiction (that is, locking down, opportunities may be opened up) illustrates one of the many apparent paradoxes in the contemporary higher educational landscape.

We have purposefully included a diverse range of papers in this special section. Sustainability education, we contend, demands engagement with difficult, troublesome knowledge, uncertainty and contentious issues. All the papers share a sense of urgency about the need to respond to the global environmental emergency, along with a commitment to see that education operates as a force for good. However, they adopt strikingly different ontological and epistemological positions, reflecting the eclectic nature and diversity of the 2020 Canterbury Conference itself. The arguments and views expressed may seem unexpected within the pages of IJSHE, but when placed within the larger challenge of widening perspectives and approaches to sustainability education, they can simply be seen as different responses to the same over-riding challenge.

Paradoxical thinking

The section starts by introducing the conceptual framework developed for the conference, the “paradox model”. Kemp and Scoffham identify two key paradoxes facing those seeking to engage with SHE:

- (1) how to develop authentic sustainability responses within the context of existing higher education structures (the resistance-alignment paradox); and
- (2) how to reconcile the demand for immediate action with the much more gradual processes of education (the fast-slow paradox).

In their paper, Kemp and Scoffham argue for the necessity of diverse and creative responses to the global crisis at a time when neoliberalism is driving higher

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education in the reverse direction. It is, therefore, significant that the etymological root of paradox means “against opinion” as the paper suggests that those working in SHE may need to develop a dissenting identity; to become [Parkin’s \(2010\)](#) “positive deviants”.

Critical and diverse voices

One of the key questions which arise in the following papers relates to the challenges of educating people to approach sustainability through the same mode of awareness that has contributed to the issues that global society now faces. Both Livingstone and Wilson highlight the insights that can be gained from “other” ways of knowing and argue the case for an urgent “turn” towards perspectives that are more aligned to human (and more-than-human) flourishing. Wilson draws upon the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church to explore the concept of “study” as a form of education that is “truly sustainable” and develops knowledge beyond (but inclusive of) discursive reason. Livingstone focuses on knowledge gained through the heart and its significance as a mode of awareness for understanding and addressing issues of unsustainability.

Another question raised within this special section relates to the consequences of adopting certain philosophical stances *vis-à-vis* the human/nature binary. In their paper on “plant blindness” Thomas, Ougham and Sanders explore the implications of one aspect of human/nature separation – an indifference to plant life and the wider green environment – and call for interdisciplinary educational approaches to re-establish their foundational status in making the world habitable. Meanwhile, writing from within the context of the humanities, Jones considers the concept of green heritage as a way of providing opportunities for SHE.

Towards a feasible utopia

We contend that sustainability education benefits from diversity, creativity and inclusive approaches and the desire to find “what works” and translate it to scale is as problematic in ESD as it is in mainstream education. Whilst initiatives to align ESD within current educational higher educational structures (such as through the SDG accord and advance HE ESD guidance) demonstrate its growing significance; the question remains as to whether such have sufficient transformational potential. A growing number of voices argue they may not. The [Sustainable Development Solutions Network \(2020\)](#) suggests that a “second operating system” may be necessary based around an alternative and shared purpose to develop inspirational sustainability projects and to ultimately replace the existing organisational structure. This “Trojan horse” approach, like our paradox model, recognises the importance of pragmatism in conjunction with idealism. It is our hope that the ideas and examples of practice presented in this special edition will contribute towards the realisation of [Barnett’s \(2018\)](#) “feasible utopia”.

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