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Radical openness and contextualisation

Reflections on a decade of learning for sustainability at the Sustainability Institute

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Building the first mixed income ecovillage in South Africa in response to deep apartheid inequity and local ecological crises has created a sense of place for transformational learning for sustainability. Rooted in the slow and gritty practice of messy complexity, colliding world views and multiple cultures, the Sustainability Institute (SI) has forged an approach to learning that combines practice with insights from a wide range of disciplines. This paper will reflect on the work of the SI as it has unfolded over the past decade. This will be done using a complex systems perspective that emphasises the radical openness of embedded systems with the vital significance of contextual meaning. This helps make sense of two interconnected processes. The first is the building of the Lynedoch EcoVillage—South Africa’s first socially-mixed ecologically-designed community. This, in turn, provides a living and learning context for the SI learning programmes which span all ages, from pre-schoolers to post-graduates studying for master’s and doctoral degrees in sustainability.

Keywords: equity; ecology; learning for sustainability; context; radical openness

Introduction

French philosopher, Edgar Morin, ends *Homeland Earth—A Manifest for the New Millennium* with his uncanny dance in paradox:

The task is huge and unassured. We cannot eschew either hope or despair. Both holding of, and resignation from, office seem equally impossible. We must have a ‘passionate patience’ (Morin 1999: 149).

The unique experience of combining an ecovillage with a learning capability has generated insights into what it means to build up from below the foundations of a more

sustainable world. What has mattered most is creating space for new forms of transdisciplinary knowledge that is not just about working across disciplines, but letting real-world problems become the motive forces of applied research and learning.

Context

Thirteen years ago, a radical shift in uprooting our family from Johannesburg, South Africa, and beginning a life on the Spier Wine Farm, Lynedoch, Stellenbosch, saw my husband and myself deeply immersing ourselves within our new local context, and finding the rhythms within a space contorted by centuries of violence through colonisation, slavery, massive ecological degradation and apartheid. The underpinning melody of our work, heard long before we knew the words—an international living and learning centre for studies and experience in ecology, community and spirit—started in understanding the etymology of the word ‘radical’. For the inherent challenge in the Latin ‘radix’ meaning ‘root’, meant to us that the justice we hungered for as activists within a country struggling with the challenges of a new democracy ravaged by its racist past was never going to happen unless transformative action took place at the very roots of the microcosm of our new and fragmented community.

First, the context showed almost instantly the attention demanded by the lack of prioritisation of children of poverty-ridden farm workers—too frequently evicted off white farmers’ land without access to tenure. The highest documented prevalence in the world of foetal alcohol syndrome caused by the so-called ‘dop’ (tot) system whereby wages have, for decades, been paid in part with alcohol; violence in homes linked to substance abuse; teenage pregnancy; aspiration to gang life; and unaffordable Western style consumption are but some of the still-present patterns. Without any form of early childhood development, preschool or crèche, the local primary school was housed in a threadbare, prefabricated building on a local white farmer’s land, again without tenure. Our way in to figuring out a wider process of contextual development was to provide the facilitation that looked to build sustainable futures with children at the heart.

Second, and parallel to this, emerged the crisis of soil and land reform. Finding ways of feeding communities looked remote without fertile soils, complicated by the state of land reform remaining to this day bafflingly slow. Chemically-treated and fertiliser-reliant soil over decades had eradicated the intricate living networks of microbes, organic matter and soil

organisms that make healthy and fertile soil. Linked to Spier was 100 ha—known as ‘commonage’—a portion of land that the white-controlled Stellenbosch Municipality had leased to white landowners with cheap 50-year contracts shortly before the democratic elections in 1994 in a bid to prevent land reform. A painful and ongoing process of knitting together restoration of soils, access to land and dignity began at the same time as starting to build community through putting children first.

These fragile and small beginnings have taken root and, over the past 13 years, one quiet articulation of a radical openness has manifested as spirit-in-action. Not content with a mere dry roll-out of a strategic project plan that holds little joy and fertility, our approach has held a kind of exuberance in one of the core values made explicit by one of our closest colleagues, a young African woman—‘lerato’ (Southern Sotho)—‘work is love made visible’. Creating a sense of place has meant to us paying attention to the traces of energy within the Lynedoch Valley at a multiplicity of levels. These initial traces have translated into:

- The first mixed-income ecological village in South Africa
- Replanted indigenous gardens with over 1,000 new trees and uncountable shrubs
- Partnership with an organic land reform farm
- Vegetable gardens for a ‘farm-to-fork’ approach to food at the SI
- Baby centre for 12 infants, and Montessori crèche for 42 farm worker children
- Lynedoch Primary School—a government primary school for 400 mainly farm worker children (a free school serving one of the poorest rural communities)
- Junior and senior aftercare facilities for nature-based learning for 50 children and adolescents
- Twenty-four, soon rising to 30, ecologically designed houses, half of which are for subsidised homeowners
- Renewable energy through solar water geysers, solar roof tiles, wind chimneys and rock store
- Water and solid waste recycling
- Collection of storm-water
- Measurement systems in place for monitoring use of energy and water

- Vocational skills—Earning for Sustainability Further Education and Training College for accredited courses in early childhood development, sustainable communities and youth sustainability skills (the first of its kind in South Africa)
- Home to the SI, a non-profit trust
- Partnership with Stellenbosch University’s School of Public Leadership on a master’s level degree in sustainable development planning and management
- Partnership with Stellenbosch University in the TSAMA hub—a Centre for the Transdisciplinary Study of Sustainability and Complexity with the first transdisciplinary PhD programme in South Africa linked in with a network of six African universities
- Home to ongoing applied research through projects such as incremental upgrading in local informal settlements, learning partner to the National Department of Human Settlements, policy development, etc

Using an interpretive lens many years later, it is probably no coincidence that making sense of our own personal uprooting created space for exploring new roots with an emerging community. Inspired as we were by creative leadership provided within Spier, our entanglement with transformation and renewal demanded authentic engagement with a context left devastated by generations of exploitation. This was a far cry from conventional academic journal articles ‘on’ a particular aspect of the Lynedoch Valley or a non-governmental organisation professional approach to providing assistance ‘to’ specific aspects of wrecked community life, or surveying grassroots life in the valley and cultivating progressive policy debates, or creating some interesting cases for students to visit and interview. It meant becoming the context. And, finding within ourselves first the points of messy damage directly connecting us in this context, rather than assuming a safe and untrue ‘healed’ stance which would have enabled us to stand apart. Children and soil—in retrospect, they seem one and the same. Images of birth, infancy and strong childhoods creating different adulthoods and futures in the present intermingled with the fertility of soils, textured patterns of beauty within food grown locally by farmers deeply connected with the rich processes and rhythms of nature. Always difficult to find the words to describe, our community meant to us the community of all life—not only human life. And the identity that has emerged is a result of, and constituted from, the interconnectivities and differences that make up the ongoing journey of an ever-thickening meshwork of relationships.

Learning for sustainability

The complex wrestling emerging from slowly falling in love with, and building, a sense of place has resulted in an imperfect integration of ecology, equity and beauty, and recognising that the underpinning question for over a decade now is really about leadership. What kind of leadership is required in order for all life to flourish?

One of the ways we have attempted to answer this question is through the crafting of our master's level degree in partnership with the School of Public Leadership, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, Stellenbosch University—an MPhil in sustainable development. The first cohort began in 2003 with 19 participants. This, the tenth year of running the programme, sees 45 post-graduate diploma participants from over 200 international applicants, and 25 MPhil participants taught by an international faculty. With four areas of specialisation possible—in sustainable development, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and development planning—the core modules include sustainability, complexity theory, environmental ethics and leadership. In our quest to create space for transformation at a multiplicity of levels, it seems that there are three key strands that, woven together in the constant and dynamic tension between individual and learning community, have built a learning process that unlocks possibilities for unexpectedness. These are: place as teacher; an integrated approach to learning; and creative disruption and discomfort.

Place as teacher

Rooted in the most unequal country in the world, embedded in systematised poverty and knowing more than we had words for, it was an intuitive choice to make the location of the degree programme at the SI in the Lynedoch EcoVillage, sharing the ecologically renovated main building with the Lynedoch Primary School. Not only do the students seldom (if ever) go to main campus, but they arrive every morning at the same time as groups of farm children tumble out of buses and as the farmers' trucks that drop them off daily. A fast game of soccer before school for the boys, age-old skipping and hopping games for the little ones, quick coffee for bleary-eyed students, start the day. The SI students, however, do not go straight to class. They start with a short morning group meeting in the huge hall, with poetry or meditative reading and doing breath-work, yoga or tai chi. From here, working in small groups, they contribute to the Lynedoch community through morning work—gardening, tree planting, working on the organic farm, cleaning the SI, preparing food from the gardens for

the crèche, aftercare, SI students and visitors. This way, through purposeful activity, the students too become one with their context. And, in their experience of engaging in these ways, there seems to evolve a relationship with the place in its capacity to teach without words. Not only does this manifest in the ongoing dialogue between students, community and nature but, in particular, the students have opportunities to engage the tensions and contradictions inherent in making sense of sustainable living. Navigating post-colonial, indigenous research methodologies with the scientific method, technical engineering wizardry with community ownership, extreme poverty in malnourished children with middle-class attempts to live without excess, and building soils through organic farming with little access to capital investment required to make small farming commercially viable are but some of the areas in which the students have practice in making sense of ecological living in a post-apartheid South Africa where there is little room for grandiosity, over-claiming successes or mere intellectual curiosity.

Prior to commencing with his sustainable development studies in 2010, Andreas Keller was working as a hedge fund accountant in Cape Town with assets under administration of R1.1 billion. His personal transformation has focused his MPhil thesis topic as: ‘Conceptualising a sustainable energy solution for in situ informal settlement upgrading’. He responded to my query in the following way (my emphases):¹

Without a question, my experience has been that Lynedoch is a teacher in its own right! I am a practical person by nature and really benefited from having the classroom grounded within a living sustainability space (Lynedoch EcoVillage). This meant that my academic studies were continually complemented *and challenged* by real life experiences, such as learning about ecologically-designed housing, talking to residents about living in a mixed-income community, watching sun-backed adobe bricks being made, planting vegetables organically, seeing a biogas digester in operation, eating lunch prepared with a solar cooker or learning about biological water treatment. Combining living and learning experiences into one space gave me a deeper, more informed experience of sustainability challenges and opportunities *and, in particular, forced me to question my own ways of being and thinking.*

Integrated approach to learning

Morin has blamed the failure to address our complex problems on disciplinary reductionism:

¹ Personal communication, 1 July 2012.

Intelligence that is fragmented, compartmentalised, mechanistic, disjunctive, and reductionistic breaks the complexity of the world into disjointed pieces, splits up problems, separates that which is linked together, and renders uni-dimensional the multi-dimensional. It is an intelligence that is at once myopic, colour blind, and without perspective; more often than not it ends up blind. It nips in the bud all opportunities for comprehension and reflection, eliminating at the same time all chances for a corrective judgement or a long-term view. Thus, the more problems become multi-dimensional, the less chance there is to grasp their multi-dimensionality. The more things reach crisis proportions, the less chance there is to grasp the crisis. The more problems become planetary, the more unthinkable they become. Incapable of seeing the planetary context in all its complexity, blind intelligence fosters unconsciousness and irresponsibility (Morin 1999: 128).

A gritty and integrated approach to transformative learning creates for participants the space for becoming entangled in the complexities at Lymedoch—a microcosm of the ‘planetary context’ to which Morin refers. Each of the compulsory eight modules sees a certain rhythm emerge. This includes morning community work and group work. Group work entails a specific angle on which each small group is expected to present at the end of a module, as part of formal assessment. Ranging from the technicalities of specific solar water geysers and comparing these, or exploring the rationale behind the different sustainable building methodologies used in the ecovillage, through to engaging the governance of the homeowners association or exploring the multiple strands of sustainability education for children, the students have a web of options and lenses through which to navigate, critique and propose innovations in a safe place, open to scrutiny.

Good old fashioned rigour in the reading demanded within each module, to be demonstrated by written summaries of articles, along with a 6000 word individual assignment, are counter-balanced by a personal journal which can be submitted in the form of prose, poetry, YouTube clip, or any creative form that is able to make explicit the experience of the individual participant in that module.

Creative disruption and discomfort

Sustainability is not about giving up on development as the environmentalists have done, or simple ‘greening’ development as ecological modernisers do; rather it is about agonistic engagements across diverse paradigms, disciplines and interests to help redefine what is generally understood by the notion of progress. Progress can be meaningful only if it includes the entire web of all life in ways that deal directly and boldly with the imbroglios that have engulfed modernity as we know it (Swilling and Annecke 2012: 25).

In many ways, creating a challenging holding space for learning for sustainable futures means constant opportunity for dialogue, disruption and disequilibrium. Often, we have been quietly astonished at the questions from colleagues that intimate pushing boundaries too far. In our experience, it is our students themselves who strongly challenge conventional boundaries forced by collisions of consumerism, the crash of the financial markets and ecological crises the world over. For this new generation of activist–academics, these questions seem constantly underpinned by those of other ways of knowing and being. The roles of intuition, consciousness, spirituality, mindfulness, dreaming and indigenous wisdom are easy companions in explorations of what it might mean to participate in innovations not simply from spaces of conventional, or ‘known’, knowledge.

However, the ‘agonistic engagements’ are not to be under-estimated in the learning journey the students undertake when they sign up for this degree. There are times of existential questioning, emotional outpouring, self-doubt and nagging discomfort with the lack of tried and tested recipes for a grand narrative with clear-cut solutions. What does seem evident, is that the closing off too early of discomfort and disruption is counter-productive, removing from the students the very practice that appears to be useful in navigating uncertainty (i.e. building a stomach for disequilibrium, living with vertigo and immersing oneself deeply in paradoxes).

The often unexpected space for creativity that is constituted from rich engagement of the students in the complexity within the multiplicity of pathways of the SI learning approach seems too to generate unexpected creativity in the topics of their assignments and theses. A smattering of thesis topics focuses a lens on the diversity and scope:

- ‘The Role of Indigenous Governance Systems in Sustainable Development: The Case of Moshupa Village, Botswana’, Segametsi Moatlhaping, 2007
- ‘Applying Corporate Social Responsibility Principles to the Church: A Case Study of the Interface Between the Indian Pentecostal/Charismatic Church in the Phoenix Community, Durban North (KwaZulu Natal) and Social Responsibility’, Virginia Francis, 2008
- ‘Spaces for Enchantment and the Unknown: Fairy Tales, Complexity Thinking and a Search for New Ways of Dreaming: Child-centred Sustainable Development’, Amelie Guyot, 2009
- ‘Exploring the Factors Influencing Non-participation of Women Living with HIV/AIDS in Empowerment Projects Attached to Primary Healthcare Clinics, Tembisa, South Africa’, Kgomotso Papole, 2010

- ‘Solar Roof Tiles: A Macro-economic Model’, Ben Mokheseng, 2010
- ‘An Investigation of Natuurboerdery (Natural Farming) Approach: A ZZ2 Case Study’, Silent Taurayi, 2011
- ‘Integrating the Poor Into the Fibre of the City in Housing and Urban Policies in Post-apartheid South Africa’, Walter Fieuw, 2011
- ‘A Case Study from a Gold Mining Company: A Call for Leadership Towards More Sustainable Futures’, Hlombe Makuluma, 2011
- ‘Just Facilitation: Facilitating Sustainable Social Change in Contexts of Injustice’, Rebecca Freeth, 2011
- ‘Spirituality and Nature in the Transformation to a More Sustainable World: Perspectives of South African Change Agents’, Helen Lockhart, 2011
- ‘Acid Mine Drainage in the Gauteng Province of South Africa: A Phenomenological Study on the Degree of Alignment Between Stakeholders Concerning a Sustainable Solution to Acid Mine Drainage’, Timothy Ewart, 2011
- ‘A Critical Review of the Development of Sustainability Indicators for the City of Cape Town: A Focus on Environmental and Socioeconomic Sustainability’, Eunice Ndeke, 2011

Conclusion

While it is clear from the students’ engagement with the Lynedoch EcoVillage that they are inspired and challenged, it must also be said that the ecovillage dwellers and work participants are intrigued and encouraged by the responses of the students to their stories. A key way to understanding the identity of the Lynedoch EcoVillage is as constituted through story telling over the last decade.

The SI in the Lynedoch EcoVillage, with mindful attention to an unfolding web of processes, is a place where potentialities for transformation are created through the intricate weaving together of equity, ecology and innovation. Our experience of integrating an ecovillage with leadership building and learning capabilities seems to have generated insights into what it means to develop from below the possibilities of more sustainable futures. Perhaps what has mattered most is the realisation that transdisciplinary knowledge is not just

about working across disciplines, but letting real-world ‘wicked’ problems become the imperatives of learning. The different levels this explores is best expressed in a poem by a student in the master’s programme (who has an under-graduate degree in chemical engineering), which he read one morning to our motley gathering in the hall: ²

Nature is like Africans

We live our lives through rhythm and dance,

Like the pulsating dances of the Earth around the sun, giving birth to the seasons and to time itself.

We breathe one air with our ancestors and our progeny, all at once.

Like the never birthed and immortal elements that form the cell that gave us the mighty elephant.

Our songs guide us through hostile terrains and hold the dance of our hearts in their pitch and tone.

Like the magnificent whales of the wondrous seas speaking secretly across the seven seas.

Nature is like Africans.

We carry the weight of the world on our broad shoulders, asking only to be greeted as you pass us by, lumela.

Like the howling Katrina yearning for man to hear Earth’s cries.

We shed tears that give life from our death.

Like the torrents that flood modern cities, filling our feeble gutters and weakly guts with the Earth’s bitter tears.

We endure suffering with a passivity unknown even to prehistoric glaciers.

Like the magical rivers of this world, rolling on in barren emptiness, longing for life that lived for life itself.

Nature is like Africans and it will die the same death.

We will all take our share, say sorry and walk away.

But nature is like the African, she will awaken and forgive all.

Maloba G Tshehla

While a decade is absurdly short in which to place any stake in the ground at all on success, many of the children who seemed so small when we began are now matriculating, and heading for tertiary education. For most of their families this is a first. Our soils are beginning to show signs of increased carbon. We have a long way to go, but the glimpses of the first green shoots are encouraging.

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² Read at the Sustainability Institute, 14 June 2012.

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