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From Classrooms to Social Movements Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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Let me begin by acknowledging that mainstream formal educational systems are largely oriented toward preparing students for a future that looks very much like the past—an increasingly tenuous assumption.

Notwithstanding perennial rhetorical emphasis on “developing critical thinkers,” education has in practice overwhelmingly rewarded those who toe the line. The ranks of mavericks and historical icons are replete with those who “performed poorly” in formal educational systems. Neoliberal education emphasizing “job readiness” is but the most recent incarnation of a longstanding role of producing compliant cogs in the dominant system. Education’s societal role all but precludes the possibility of a truly transformative agenda, and not just because it increasingly relies on private-sector funding in the face of welfare state retrenchment.

Transformation implies a thorough understanding of how power operates. But few educational programs provide students with those insights, preferring the convenient (and self-serving) fiction that incremental improvements (or even so-called “breakthroughs”) in knowledge drive change, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary.

Elsewhere I have argued that deep transformation requires much more than the current obsession with technical “solutions.” Arguably, the sustainability crisis is not a technical problem. Technical solutions for many of our current challenges have, in many cases, already been developed and field tested somewhere around the world. It is unclear that it is purely a political or even social problem either. The sustainability crisis may be more accurately described as a crisis of imagination. In a quote widely attributed to Frederic Jameson, for most people “it is

easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” Perhaps it could even be said that the sustainability crisis is a relationship problem. We have fallen out of right relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with the more-than-human world. And as any who have had relationship problems know, they are rarely solved with technical fixes: they require a change of heart. How do we educate for a change of heart? Coming into deep relationship with ourselves, each other, and the more-than-human world is the stuff of land-based learning of the likes pioneered by generations of Indigenous elders and knowledge-keepers. It is rarely realized in the sterile confines of a school classroom.

Much as a change of heart that encompasses a way of being based on sacred reciprocity with all of life may be truly transformative, it is unlikely to be “marketable” in terms the dominant system understands.

Still, there are signs of gathering momentum for change, both within and beyond formal educational systems, including increasingly strident calls for change and initiatives like the pan-Canadian [Ecological Determinants Group on Education](#), with an articulation of “core competencies” for a variety of fields. Yet actual change and tangible curricular reform continues, with few exceptions, to be a painfully slow, arduous process characterized by the kind of inertia that Stephen Sterling references in his excellent [opening gambit](#) on this topic.

Anyone familiar with the Cuban Special Period occasioned by the sudden loss of Soviet oil and the bumpy rapid transition to a more diversified and sustainable permaculture-based system will know that universities and schools in Cuba pivoted rapidly to support decentralized learning oriented toward the immediacies of survival. Whether Western educational systems will prove similarly responsive in the face of escalating disruptions to taken-for-granted systems of governance and procurement remains to be seen.

Insofar as it remains challenging to be sustainable in an unsustainable world, enmeshed as we all are in multiple intersecting systems of globalization, and surrounded by mainstream media messaging that reflects the dominant narrative of ecological modernization, educational institutions are in a bit of a bind: either they prepare change agents and citizens for a rapidly changing world and risk them being out of sync with the still-lagging reality of business-as-usual,

or they continue to train for job readiness based on the widely held belief that the future will be a recognizable and predictable extension of the past. In the first case, they risk misalignment with the current state of affairs, with predictable consequences (financial and reputational). In the second, transformative change is not well served, and short-term vested interests prevail. It is an unenviable situation made more challenging by rampant individualism and reliance on cognitive behavior change models that maintain that knowledge and education are engines of change, both necessary and sufficient to the task of fundamentally reshaping societies. Too often, we seek to change people by “educating” them, without inquiring into the contexts, circumstances, constraints, and power relations that perpetuate the status quo. Further, if we accept that the sustainability crisis is not something to be visited on our grandchildren but something that is becoming unavoidable in our lifetimes, we must also question how much faith we have put in educational systems to “educate the next generation” of more sustainability-oriented leaders. We don’t have another fifty years to wait for today’s generation of students to take their place, even if our faith in their being educated to act differently once they end up in the same positions is well-founded (and it may well not be).

This brings me to Stephen Sterling’s point that social learning extends well beyond the classroom and formal educational systems. We are all learning, and arguably much of that learning, as we are social animals, is, well... social. One arena in which such learning takes place is social movements. Social movements are powerful agents of change. Occupy singlehandedly catapulted the language of the 1% vs. the 99% onto the lips of most public figures in a way that more than twenty-five years of anti-poverty research and lobbying had not. Movements for LGBTQi rights and women’s rights, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Fridays for a Future, and the Arab Spring, to mention just a few, have had a powerful impact. And part of that impact has been on those who have participated in them. Movements like ecovillages, Transition towns, and permaculture create spaces that normalize sustainable living and enable participants to go further in broadening their imagination and deepening their practice. This learning by doing is at the center of social learning. This kind of learning aligns with what Peggy Holman has termed “engaging emergence.” This is the kind of collective wisdom and emerging know-how that will carry us into and through the transition that is at hand. To date, educators and educational institutions have not done a stellar job of recognizing the importance of social movements as

agents of change and of becoming effective allies in that work. This too is changing, as the world changes.

Lest I come across as overly dismissive of the transformative potential of education, I wish to underscore my intention to thread a line between enduring faith in and commitment to actualizing the insights and potential of transformative learning on the one hand and the recognition of the geo-political realities of how power operates and how education has been and remains, in the main, complicit in colonialism, systemic racism, and neoliberalism. It is a case of “both-and” rather than “either-or”—a picture that leaves room for both a sanguine appreciation of the realpolitik of educational reform as well as the proliferating spaces of resistance and innovation. Unlike the fictional domain of one-size-fits-all magic pills, the outcome of this race of ecological and social tipping points will be decided on the basis of the resonances emerging from a patchwork quilt of initiatives spanning the continuum from reform to revolution. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get to it.

About the Author



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