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Educating for the Future We Want
Opening Essay for GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

Stephen Sterling

Introduction

Our ability to achieve a livable future for all depends on whether we can foster an unprecedented degree of social learning. There is no change without learning, and no learning without change. But with the stakes higher than ever before, time is worryingly short. How, under such urgency, do we effect such a large-scale paradigm shift?

Formal education systems have—or *should have*—a critical role in the global social learning process underpinning the Great Transition. On the face of it, the challenge seems straightforward. If current educational policies and practices insufficiently address ecological, social, and economic sustainability, we can just do some tweaking and add on some key ideas. Job done. Except it is not so simple. If education is to be an agent of change, it has itself to be the subject of change. Our educational systems are implicated in the multiple crises before us, and without meaningful rethinking, they will remain maladaptive agents of business as usual, leading us into a dystopian future nobody wants.

Over the past few decades, new movements have championed social change education centered on such themes as the environment, peace, human rights, anti-racism, multiculturalism, alternative futures, and global citizenship. For compactness, in this discussion this diverse constellation will be referred to as "sustainability" education.

Despite this array of efforts and the common values of social justice and ecological integrity, the fragmentation of energy and effort has limited the potential for significant progress.

The possibility of greater coherence arose three-and-a-half decades ago with the emergence of the sustainable development framework, which in turn spurred the concept of "education for sustainable development" (ESD). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the lead global agency on sustainability education, has been the primary proponent of ESD, with the UN launching a "Decade of ESD" that spanned 2005 to 2014 and culminated in the report *Shaping the Future We Want*.[1] While the work of UNESCO and its partners has been impressive, several fundamental constraints have hampered the realization of the goal of "educating for the world we want."

First, there is a limited conception of the role education can even play. Sustainable development efforts have downplayed the potential for education to help to realize more equitable, ecologically healthy futures, or have viewed it in isolation from other instruments of social change. The role of education tends to be narrowly confined to such aims as basic literacy and education for all (EFA), which are necessary but not sufficient for deeper change.

Second, a limited view of where "education" takes place stresses formal educational structures at the expense of other learning contexts. As education is primarily associated in the public mind with schools and universities, forms of education critical to empowerment and social change—such as lifelong learning, non-formal education, and community education—have received less attention and support.[2]

Finally, mainstream education policy and practice exhibits an alarming lack of engagement with the broader challenge of securing a safe local and global future. This distant relationship between the worlds of sustainable development and education has tended to be self-perpetuating over years.[3]

The gap has shrunk notably since the launch of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Initially, the role of education as a means of addressing the SDGs was not well recognized. However, many international agencies and networks have begun to endorse education as a change agent for the SDGs, and an increasing number of universities have begun to see the SDGs as an important focus for their work, more easily engaged with than the broader and less defined challenge represented by ESD.[4]

Still, urgent questions remain about the proportion of institutions engaged worldwide, the extent of engagement across the spectrum of university functions, and the depth of such initiatives, namely, the degree to which this response shifts the underlying assumptions and values driving institutions. If we are to embrace the SDGs seriously, we must critically examine the structural factors that led to the multiple crises that made the SDGs necessary in the first place while also interrogating the concept of sustainable development itself.[5]

Broadly, education systems have taken one of four approaches to the sustainability agenda: (1) no response, (2) accommodation, (3) reform, and (4) transformation. In the first, current global precarities are absent or barely reflected in policies and practices; in the second, institutional responses center on campus greening and curriculum accommodation in "obvious" disciplines only. The latter two responses go further. A reformative response reflects intentional re-thinking at a policy level leading to shifts across much of the institution. A transformative approach nurtures a sustainability ethos as the driver of purpose, policy, and practice. This active perspective results in fundamental redesign and iterative learning. Most institutions remain in the first two categories. Yet a trend of institutional learning is becoming evident as schools and universities increasingly open themselves to a degree of reformative self-examination—driven by rising awareness of the human and planetary predicament, and, importantly, by intensifying demands by students keenly aware of threats to their life chances. The transformative approach, however, remains rare.

Educating for the World We Don't Want

There are without doubt examples of outstanding and innovative sustainability education practices across the world. Nonetheless, the notion that educational systems are heading (and heading us) in the wrong direction has been growing, particularly since the launch of the SDGs.

As this sense has grown more widespread, the language employed by UNESCO has become more radical, going so far as to endorse transformation. Yet the understatement in one line from UNESCO's "Roadmap: ESD for 2030," which will be officially launched at the UNESCO World Conference on ESD in May 2021, speaks volumes: "[O]fen ESD is interpreted with narrow focus on topical issues rather than with a holistic approach on learning content, pedagogy, and learning outcomes." Clearly, we have a long way to go.

Left unanswered is *why* sustainability education is not more widely recognized or *why* it is "interpreted with narrow focus," thereby remaining safely within conventional development paradigms.[6] Answering these questions sufficiently—as well as explaining the *from where*, *to where*, and *why* of social transformation—requires a critical examination at the paradigmatic level, i.e., the epistemic sets of values and ideas which fundamentally influence purpose, curriculum design, pedagogy, and all other aspects of education.

Any kind of paradigmatic breakthrough also requires clear acknowledgement of the socioeconomic, political, and technological pressures on the system—very real constraints and influences that weigh heavily on mainstream educational thinking and practice, even those with "transformative" intentions. In recent decades, the dominance of neoliberal thinking in economics, politics, and wider society has usurped previous conceptions and traditions of education as a public service for the public good. A narrowly instrumental view of education, modeled to serve the perceived demands of a globalizing economy and culture, now defines and shapes learning. This turn is reflected in an increasingly market-driven educational system maintained by a proliferating "global testing culture." The system fosters competition, homogenization, and standardization in both national and international spheres. These developments rest on a conviction that education should serve a growth-oriented economy, fallaciously equated with the social good. Over time, this neoliberal wave has subtly but powerfully displaced more educationally defensible practices informed by liberal, holistic, and humanistic philosophies regarding the nature and purpose of education.

The neoliberal framework has spawned a Global Education Industry driven by private sector organizations and businesses, worth several trillion dollars and boosted significantly by the phenomenal growth of online learning as a result of COVID-19. This is exemplified by the burgeoning influence of "EdTech," a massive effort by tech philanthropists, tech giants, and edu-business companies to shape educational policy and delivery.[7] This "reimagining education for the future" appears to have little to do with human or planetary needs, and more to do with tech means becoming universal ends. While digital learning has a role to play in transformative education, the overall effect of the contemporary push, such as by EdTech, is to displace progressive models while restricting the potential for liberatory innovation.

Neoliberal thinking has narrowed conceptions of education's *purpose* (what we think education is for), *breadth* (what we conceive as valid educational content and curricula), and *depth* (pedagogy and the learning experience). Sustainability, by contrast, requires deep attention to interlaced paradigms, policies, purposes, and practices to understand education's historical contribution to current crises, its adequacy for the age we find ourselves in, and its potential as a remedial agency. The transformative paradigm of *sustainable education* promises a liberatory escape from the bedrocks of the prevalent education epistemology—reductionism, objectivism, materialism, and dualism—and the collective psyche that maintains them. These deep influences manifest in much of the educational landscape above the surface: unitary disciplines and separate departments; belief in value-free knowing; privileging cognitive over affective and practical knowing, as well as analysis over synthesis; prescriptive curricula and measurable learning outcomes; and learning that fails to examine and challenge basic assumptions, values, and ethics.[8]

The challenge calls for much more than the oft quoted objective of "integrating sustainability into education": the planetary context must now be paramount. More than ever, educators and students are questioning educational policies and practices maladapted to real-world crises and a threatened future. However, although education is purportedly about the future, many mainstream policymakers, senior managers, and academics still seem oblivious to the perils society faces.

Overcoming such stasis requires a strategy of critical reflexivity that illuminates and challenges the dominant technocentric and economistic "rationality" that pervades thinking and practice, as well as the funding and reward structures that constrain innovative collaboration and forward-looking creative thinking. We need to break down barriers through communication and networking, dispersed and transformative leadership, intergenerational initiatives, inter- and transdisciplinarity, and action research and community initiatives. This emerging path offers a relational, ecological, participative, and holistic alternative that speaks to the real needs of individuals, communities, and the planet.

Class Struggles

The wider political and cultural factors discussed above help explain the weak response of educational systems and institutions to calls for reorientation. Rather than leading to deep institutional learning and transformation, the mode of incorporation of sustainability issues

has typically been *accommodation* that leaves fundamental assumptions and practices largely unquestioned and unchanged. This incremental approach has some value if seen as a first step in a longer transition, but is an impediment to fundamental progress where regarded as a sufficient action.

Recently, however, there are increasing signs of genuine rethinking that transcends accommodation, a recognition that deeper change is required. This growing awareness parallels and derives energy from similar shifts in other sectors across society as "business as usual" looks less and less tenable. New ways of seeing, thinking, and doing are burgeoning, prompted further by the disruptive effects of COVID-19. This ferment offers the exciting possibility of a shift in education from a vehicle of social reproduction and maintenance, towards a vision of continuous co-evolution of education and society in a relationship of mutual transformation: a "future-creating, innovative and open system" of education.[9] Such real-world engagement provides a motivating environment for quality learning and enhancing educational outcomes for students and the world they are inheriting.

In the last few years, more academics have become educational activists through their publications, research collaboration, community engagement, and campaigning.[10] Inter-university networks and intersectoral initiatives are on the rise. The Regional Centres of Expertise in ESD, led by universities networking with local stakeholders on sustainability awareness, education, and capacity building, now number some 180 globally.[11] Growing numbers of international academic networks and initiatives reflect sustainability concerns.[12] Although more radical initiatives for pursuing transformative ideas head on are often sidelined, some independent institutions have managed to make an outsized impact. Notably, Schumacher College, in Devon, UK, has gained an international reputation during its thirty years of existence for fostering transformative learning experiences and seeding pioneering initiatives across the world.[13] The task ahead for all of these networks and institutions is to manifest and champion a more holistic, humanistic, ecological, and integrative form of education within established systems, and with colleagues who may still be uncomprehending or apprehensive.

Education for a Great Transition

While a new discourse on repurposing education is arising in some circles, a dangerous disconnect remains between Westernized formal education systems and the dynamic social learning needed in this watershed moment. The world of institutions, concerned largely with income and status in a competitive market, is on a collision course with the larger world, which faces an existential threat to human survival and the integrity of the biosphere underpinning all life. How do we rapidly recalibrate education so that it serves rather than undermines the future?

Historically, the central role of education has been to socialize the young and to ensure continuity in society, whether indigenous, pre-modern, or modern. In stable conditions, this reproduction function is sufficient. But not in volatile and uncertain times, when the future will not be a linear extension of the past and when social innovation, creativity, and experimentation is critically important. The contradiction now is that the more we try to ensure continuity by doing more of the same, the greater the prospects for a discontinuous and chaotic future become.

Some social critics think biophysical limits will inevitably usher in a post-growth world characterized by relocalization, profound hazards, and discontinuities for both human and natural systems. This very real prospect behooves educational institutions to become systemic learning organizations infused by a transformative pedagogy *within* education systems that reaches policymakers and practitioners. This transition would constrain the standardizing global testing culture while circumventing economistic educational rationales in favor of a purpose and role aligned with the immense challenge and exhilarating possibility of securing social and ecological wellbeing. Notably, the university then becomes an adaptive, innovating institution engaged in an ongoing co-evolutionary learning process with community and society. In this scenario, the conventional concerns of status, reputation, and income are subsumed within a nobler culture of critical commitment.

An ecological reimagining of education requires reclaiming authentic education by drawing from progressive, liberal, critical, emancipatory, and holistic educational antecedents. In the best traditions, universities are seen as sites and guardians of critical scholarship, creativity, empowerment, and contribution to the common good. Resurgent educational institutions can—in tandem with movements in wider society—build resilient communities, ecologies, and localized

economies. This kind of transition education is beginning to happen—a living learning process essential for generating the collective intelligence for survival, security, and well-being of social-ecological systems.

Beyond the whole institutional strategies of a small but increasing number of universities internationally, interest is growing in "critical engagement" and "regenerative education" by committed staff and students in research and teaching. This engagement takes forms such as education for resilience, service learning in the community, experiential pedagogies, collaborative inquiry across disciplines, embrace of alternative and non-Western knowledge traditions, the development of sustainability competencies, and futures work. These pioneering shifts may not yet warrant announcing the onset of widespread transformative education, but they do open a pathway for a Great Transition in higher education as a critical component of social learning and cultural change.

We are approaching fifty years since the UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm endorsed the key role of education, nearly thirty years since Agenda 21 proposed that education is "critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness," and five years since the SDGs set a target date of 2030. The ambitious UNESCO "Futures of Education" initiative promises a chance to reset direction and priorities. But to date, strong cultural inertia and the counterforce of neoliberalism have slowed progress, and the time is long overdue for holding Westernized education policy and practice to account. Now, efforts to transform education are greater than ever, but so, too, are the stakes and urgency. We need to move fast and with bold aspiration, while retaining critical reflexivity, as we create a new chapter in the evolution of our ways of educating on this—as yet—still beautiful planet.

Endnotes

1. Carole Buckler and Heather Creech, *Shaping the Future We Want: UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (Paris: UNESCO, 2014), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230171.

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8. Stephen Sterling, *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change* (Cambridge, UK: Green Books, 2001); Stephen Sterling, "Sustainable Education," in *Science, Society and Sustainability: Education and Empowerment for an Uncertain World*, eds. Donna Gray, Laura Colucci-Gray, and Elena Camino (New York: Routledge, 2009).

9. Béla H. Bánáthy, *Systems Design of Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 199l), 129.

10. The international call to education to take action on climate found at https://educators-for-climate-action.org/ has attracted nearly 2000 signatures. The Transition Lab (https://www.transitionlab.earth/) launched an open letter to university senior managers in 2019 which quickly attracted over 1000 signatures.

11. You can find more about UNU Regional Centres of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (RCEs) at https://www.rcenetwork.org/portal/.

12. These networks include Global Alliance of Tertiary Education and Student Sustainability Networks, IAU's Higher Education and Research for SD Cluster; the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative; University Alliance for Sustainability; The Green Office movement; and Learning Planet (a global alliance of educators and institutions). More radical initiatives which address the Great Transition explicitly include Campus de la Transition and Gaia University.

13. Stephen Sterling, John Dawson, and Paul Warwick, "Transforming Sustainability Education at the Creative Edge of the Mainstream: A Case Study of Schumacher College," *Journal of Transformative Education* 16, no. 4 (July 2018): 323–343.

About the Author

Stephen Sterling is Emeritus Professor of Sustainability Education at the Sustainable Earth Institute, University of Plymouth, UK. Widely published, he has worked in environmental and sustainability education in the academic and NGO fields nationally and internationally for over four decades, including as a consultant and advisor on UNESCO'S Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programs, and as co-chair of the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD International Jury. He is a Distinguished Fellow of the Schumacher Institute, a Senior Fellow of the International Association of Universities (IAU), and a Fellow of the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC).

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