Sustainability Education:
Critical Themes and Personal Perspectives

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My Path as a Sustainability Educator

• Sense of justice awakened at an early age.
• The search for meaning.
• Connecting the dots.
• Wanting to understand the big picture.
• The immediacy of currently converging socio-ecological crises.
The Late Capitalist Word:
A Critical Historical Juncture for Praxis

**Converging Crises:**

- Peak Oil and Gas
- Fresh Water Drawdown and Supply Shortages
- Climate Change
- Advancing Enclosure of the Commons and the Commodification of Everything, Including Basic Necessities of Life and Traditional Knowledge
- Cultural Hegemony of Capitalism
- Global Ecological Crisis
- Intensely Concentrated Wealth and Power
My work addresses what is perhaps the central question for sustainability educators today: in this time of converging socio-ecological crises and a rapidly closing window of time in which to act effectively to mitigate or prevent devastating forms of socio-ecological collapse of modern societies, exactly what should sustainability educators teach and how?

**Focus:** Higher education.
What is Praxis? And what is transdisciplinarity?

Central Components of my Critical Pedagogy of Sustainability
• Situatedness within the Critical Social Theory of Sustainability
• Teaching the Theory of Enforced Dependency within the Globalized Economy of Late Capitalism
• Focus on Place as a Concept and Construct for Sustainability Praxis
• Teaching/Modeling Leadership for Sustainability
• Sustainability as Education
• Active Learning

Conclusions
• What’s New Here?
• How Does this Work Contribute to the Field of Sustainability Education?
• What Is the Meaning of My Work to Me as an Educator?
What is Praxis?
Transdisciplinarity

Transdisciplinary studies, research, and action focus attention on thematic threads that inform complex, real-world issues and challenges such as globalization, climate change, and sustainability. Transdisciplinary scholars and practitioners engage with these issues and challenges using integrative approaches to knowledge-making with the aim of transforming the subject(s) of study by informing purposeful human activity. Transdisciplinary research draws upon disciplinary methods of knowledge-making as means to generate and synthesize new knowledge, but transcends the disciplines in its drive to approximate the complex reality of its subjects of study. Transdisciplinary work is integrative, socially relevant, and oriented toward problem solving. Therefore, transdisciplinary work engages with human values in producing knowledge and identifying avenues for action. Thematic threads that draw the attention of transdisciplinary scholars and practitioners run across diverse sectors of society and differing loci of knowledge creation and use....
This work entails an ontological perspective of the world as integrated, complex, and whole. Trandisciplinarians therefore seek to integrate perspectives and knowledge originating both inside and outside academe and to deal with epistemological questions of the validity of knowledge created in various contexts. Since boundaries within knowledge-making are both questioned and crossed by transdisciplinarians, transdisciplinary work also implies a critique of the “ivory tower” conception of academic work as a “pure” form of knowledge creation rightly detached from messy real world contexts. Transdisciplinary work is distinguished from interdisciplinary work by its engagement with human values within problem solving contexts.
Evolves from James Pitttman’s definition of “living sustainability” as

The long-term equilibrium of health and integrity maintained dynamically within any individual system (organism, organization, ecosystem, community, etc.) through a diversity of relationships with other systems.

“Socio-ecological living sustainability.”
Critical Social Theory of Sustainability:

Asserts the importance of in-depth, transdisciplinary social critique rooted in a critique of domination that explicitly recognizes the exploitation of both people and nature as deriving from the same sources within modern industrial societies.

Recognizes that humans are part of nature and dependent upon nature as the source of all life. This recognition promotes forms of praxis through which human health and ecosystemic health can be pursued as a single end.

Derives from historicist foundations. It recognizes that its critique manifests in and through history and that its validity must be judged according to its ability to inform sustainability-oriented action.

Is not “neutral” or entirely “objective.” Sustainability-oriented education recognizes its goals can only be achieved through conscious, applied, adaptive, resilient, and inclusive willing of the common good.
Critical Social Theory of Sustainability:

*Draws upon diverse strands of critical social theory, including*

- Those advanced by the Frankfurt School of critical social theorists (particularly Herbert Marcuse’s theories of one-dimensional society and repressive desublimation),
- Sustainability-oriented critiques of the modern, Western worldview (nicely summarized by Charlene Spretnak),
- Karl Polanyi’s critique of modern industrial society as a system that places people in service to the economy rather than the reverse,
- Marx’s theories of alienation and class conflict,
- Antonio Gramsci’s theories of cultural hegemony, praxis, and agency,
- Deep ecology,
- Ecopsychology,
- Ecofeminism, and
- Indigenous worldviews regarding relationships between people and nature (particularly those articulated by Jeannette Armstrong, Dennis Martinez, and Enrique Salmon).
Enforced dependency is a form of reliance upon external resources or externally created conditions. For such dependency to function as enforced dependency, it must, once established, progressively undermine the self-sufficiency and resilience of the dependent person, community, institution, or government, making the dependent party increasingly vulnerable to exploitation. The initial conditions of enforced dependency are often established through colonialism or imperialism. The “enforcement” of enforced dependency derives from the increasingly dangerous and/or destabilizing results that would entail from severing the dependent relationship. Under conditions of enforced dependency, the resiliency of the dependent party decreases progressively over time. Typically, dependent parties are also progressively co-opted into supporting the system of enforced dependency upon which they have come to rely, even as the system progressively robs them of freedom, independence, and resiliency.
As the dependency deepens, the social power of dominant people, institutions, or governments who provide the resources or create the conditions that enforce dependency increases with regard to dependent parties. Dominant parties may increasingly constrain the decisions and actions of dependent parties in order to enhance their opportunities to gain material and financial wealth and increase their social power. Though dominant parties may gain substantial wealth and power through enforced dependency, over the long term, their own resiliency may be negatively impacted as the socio-ecological capacity of dependent parties to serve as sources of wealth and power for dominant parties declines.
The Theory of Enforced Dependency, Continued:

A structuralized view of political economy without being deterministic.

Focuses particularly on the points of instability within local and global political economy and highlights the pressing need to develop forms of political economy that increase socio-ecological resiliency in the face of looming (perhaps already occurring) system collapse.

Draws upon arguments articulated by:

Place as a Concept and Construct for Sustainability Praxis

A construct appropriate for addressing:

- Peak Oil
- Climate Change
- Diversity and Resiliency

Characterized by:

- (Re)integration with the Natural World
- Subsistence Economies
- Human Scale
- Self-determination
- Community
- Living Reciprocity

Draws additionally on the work of:

- Jan Douwe van der Ploeg
Sustainability Pedagogy

Counterhegemonic in the tradition of critical pedagogy – involves questioning of internalized assumptions.

Place centered so as to reduce abstractions related to social scale and scope that promote collective violence.

Focused on themes of resiliency and self-determination rather than enforced dependency -- especially where the basics of life are concerned.

This pedagogy should engage students in sustainability praxis, a form of education that unites theory and practice and that engages students in reflection aimed at further developing and refining their praxis both during and beyond the class.
Leadership for Sustainability

Recognizes that sustainability cannot be achieved in the absence of social justice.

Explicitly engages in critique of hegemonic forms of leadership characterized by rigid hierarchies.

Engages in pedagogical practices that demonstrate alternatives to hegemonic leadership.

Draws upon the theories of:

Jack Mezirow, Stephen Brookfield, Robert K. Greenleaf, Robert Terry, Paul Loeb, and others.
Leadership for Sustainability, Continued

Consciously grapples with a central contradiction of sustainability education: how to engage in sustainability-oriented leadership without ultimately reinforcing existing hierarchies.

In doing so, theorizes a continuum ranging from exploitive to sustainable leadership based on:
• The purposes to which leadership is applied and
• The authenticity of the leader and the leadership.

Theorizes that sustainability-oriented forms of leadership are characterized by:
• Access to leadership roles that is distributed throughout society,
• Leadership preparation that permeates all areas of society, and
• Socio-ecologically integrated place-centeredness.

Potential for developing leadership norms that explicitly refuse totalitarian embodiments.
Sustainability as Education

Critique, action, reflection: praxis. Content of the critique important.

Pedagogical processes important, especially as they relate to the concept of leadership – teaching as an exercise in sustainable leadership.

College as part of the “real world” that we very much need to change for the better.

Education that helps engage students in building conceptual and tangible bridges toward a sustainable future.
In both process and content, draws upon the theories of:

Paulo Freire,
Peter McLaren,
Sandy Grande,
David Gruenwald (now Greenwood),
Rick Medrick,
Basarab Nicolescu,
Stephen Brookfield,
Jack Mezirow, and others.

In content, draws upon a wide body of critical social and economic theory.
Service Learning, Internships, and Action Research Projects

Individualized and group student projects combined with student analytical reflections on projects:

- Campus orchard
- Campus beehives
- Apple Days Festival
- Field trips and service learning at La Boca Center for Sustainability
- Take Charge Energy Challenge in public schools
- Sponsorship work with a local nonprofit
Local Food as a Powerful Nexus for Sustainability Education

- It is a basic necessity in which everyone is interested.
- It provides a nexus for praxis that incorporates all of the counterhegemonic theories that comprise my critical pedagogy of sustainability.
- Connecting with food cycles involves connecting with nature.
- It is relatively easy to involve fairly large numbers of students working simultaneously on local food projects.
Conclusions: What’s New Here? And How Does it Contribute to the Field of Sustainability Education in the Context of Catastrophe?

Highlights domination and oppression as central themes in unsustainability and suggests alternatives.

Presents a well developed theory of agency based in a clearly defined concept of sustainability as an ecological and historical process.

Conceptualizes local and global socio-ecological systems as intimately related in important ways and provides a framework (theory of enforced dependency) for comprehending this relationship.

Presents a coherent analysis of sources of unsustainability within the global political economy and modern, industrial cultures.

Offers an open and adaptable framework for analysis and action aimed at addressing converging socio-ecological crises.

Source of clear-eyed hope and example for action.
“[Apple Days] was the contrast to all the negative things that were brought to light. Given the material, if all that had been presented were the bad, in my current place of understanding I would have simply shut down or even dropped out from it being too intense to process. Essentially, Apple Days provided me with the positive ideals I needed to absorb the information.”
“If there is one thing I most cherish in taking away from this course, it is the hope that sustainability on a personal level is plausible, and that the chances of finding a community/rural neighborhood that feels the same is as well. As Orr mentions [in *Down to the Wire*], optimism is thinking positively while hope is reached after critically examining information. This class has given me hope on this scope.”
What’s in it for me as an educator?

• Meaningful work.
• Sense of hope.
• Connectedness.
• Empathy.
• My own humanity.
• Love.
Occupy Education is motivated by the sustainability crisis and energized by the drive for social justice that inspired the Occupy movement. Situated within the struggle for sustainability taking place amidst looming resource shortages, climate change, economic instability, and ecological breakdown, the book is a timely contribution to community education and action. It opens a whole realm of integrated theory to educators and sustainability activists—and demonstrates how that theory can be moved into practice. Occupy Education is an excellent text for courses in sustainability studies, social philosophy, globalization, social justice, food system praxis, sustainability education, political economy, and environmental studies.

“Our minds, and education which shapes our minds, have been colonised with false categories of separation, fragmentation, competition, scarcity, and greed. We have to free our minds in order to free life on earth and all people from the threat of destruction and extinction. Occupy Education is an important book for our finite air way to an inclusive freedom to Earth Democracy.”
—VANDANA SHIVA, FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE NAVDANYA PROJECT; AUTHOR OF EARTH DEMOCRACY AND OTHER BOOKS; WINNER OF THE RIGHT LIVELIHOOD AWARD

“With the social and environmental fabric of our world wearing down, and the time in which to act rapidly dwindling, along comes a book that offers us a sense of grounded hope and the tools to educate ourselves for a sustainable future. In the timeless tradition of radically engaged scholarship, Tina Lynn Evans not only illuminates the nature of the crises in our midst, but more importantly casts our collective gaze toward the faint beacon of light that is emerging on the horizon of human resiliency and innovation.”
—RANDALL AMSTER, GRADUATE CHAIR OF HUMANITIES, PRESCOTT COLLEGE

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My Academia.edu site:
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Selected Bibliography


Selected Bibliography, Continued


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