Are we Educating Leaders or Activists? Adventures in Higher Education for Sustainability

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Abstract

An account of the conception and operation of a post-graduate institute devoted to sustainability leadership. In precursors to what became the Institute for Leadership and Sustainability and in its early years of operation, founding faculty members adopted a distinct ethos and pedagogy derived in part from the intellectual and educational history of the English Lake District where IFLAS is located. In this talk, one of those founders discusses that ethos and the equally distinct approach of the centre to leadership teaching and scholarship.

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Introduction

In 2005, in a college that was shortly to become the new University of Cumbria, we conceived and planned, first a post-graduate degree, then several more and at last an entire institute, all focused on leadership for sustainability. In that process we addressed multiple pedagogical, intellectual and institutional difficulties.

The 'we' was me, Richard Lemmey, Chris Loynes and Kate Rawles; we were joined in a second stage by Jem Bendell, Katie Carr, Jo Chaffer, Grace Dent, Malcolm McIntosh and David Murphy. The outcome was a decade of operation as the Institute for Leadership and Sustainability under the directorship of Jem Bendell and his successor David Murphy. The institute, under a different name and now operating within a business faculty, continues to operate in the small town of Ambleside, in the English Lake District – a UNESCO World Heritage site that combines an extraordinarily beautiful landscape with a profound intellectual and educational history.

Leadership for Sustainable Development

But I start in a seminar room in London, where, some years earlier, I happened to be teaching on a course with the title 'MA in Leadership for Sustainable Development'. I asked a dozen students to tell me what came to mind when they heard the word 'leadership'. In response, a student described how, at a family dinner shortly after she started the course, her aunt had asked her what she was studying. The student told her that it was an MA in Sustainable Development. She had omitted the word 'leadership', she said, because it was unnecessary, even embarrassing. She did not aspire to leadership; she merely wanted to work with others to bring about a just and sustainable world. Other students reported similar feelings. In discussion, a consensus emerged that, for them, the idea of leadership was tainted by masculinised exceptionalism; that it was too much associated with the world of business and business education. What word, I asked, would they prefer? Again, there was agreement: they were activists now and they wanted to

be activists in future: well-informed, confident, professional activists whose mission was to help facilitate wholesale change in the social and economic mechanisms of capitalism. Activists for change – what better way to describe leadership could there be? And yet, for them, the L-word was tainted, an embarrassment.

Nevertheless, when, in 2008, we founded the Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS), the name of our first degree was MA in Sustainability Leadership. We did not think then, or now, that there is a special kind of leadership called 'sustainability leadership': on the contrary, it was our conviction, one that has strengthened since, that prevailing conceptions and models of leadership were more likely to hinder than help in the face of a global emergency; that the idea of leadership had been recruited by capital, that the vernacular literature of leadership and leadership education was platitudinous and deaf to critical scholarship. That, so far from being part of the solution to the problems facing humanity, leadership thus conceived was part of the problem; that the idea of leadership, as it was represented in the voluminous popular literature, had become a positive affordance for reckless, greedy and narcissistic opportunism; that the idea of honourable leadership for the common good had been drowned out by a literature that reduces leadership to a mere function in mere profit-seeking, heedless of consequences. But, despite all that, we retained the word. That decision might be seen as a marker of the degree to which the idea of leadership has become necessary in discussion of organisation, business and change (I should add that the validation process was made easier by the presence of the L-word: the host university was, at that time, introducing degrees with titles like 'Public Health Leadership' and 'Leadership in Primary Education'). I prefer to think that it was because we intended to rescue leadership from its captivity in the fastnesses of neoliberalism and restore to it its deeper meaning as an honourable form of salient moral action, a modality of collaboration and democracy.

In 2008, IFLAS was established in the Charlotte Mason Building on the University of Cumbria campus at Ambleside in the middle of the English Lake District. The town and the campus already had a distinguished history of radical educational projects and had been home to a disproportionate number of significant scholarly and cultural figures – not least Harriet Martineau, William Wordsworth, John Ruskin and, from 1892, Charlotte Mason. Mason had, in 1892, founded the college that came to bear her name. Since then, the campus had been in various hands, including Lancaster University and University College of St Martin. That last occupant was awarded full degree powers in 2005, and became, shortly afterwards, the University of Cumbria.

It was clear to us that, in creating a wholly new institute of higher learning inside a wholly new university, we had a blank sheet on which to write a wholly specific ethos, pedagogy and curriculum. Wholly specific and new, but informed by the educational history of the site and the locality. I mean today to lay out the main features of that ethos.

The centre was to be devoted to post-graduate education for sustainability. All prospective students would be mid-career professionals studying part-time on several small masters programmes and one large-scale sustainability-flavoured MBA. That MBA was to become a joint venture with Robert Kennedy College in Zurich. It drew the majority of its students from the global South and quickly became one of the largest courses of its kind in the world. Within two years, a tiny faculty under the direction of Professor Jem Bendell was teaching over a thousand post-graduates and a handful of doctoral students from over 120 countries.

It is impossible to know all the strands that were woven into our thinking about the new institute; in any case, a going concern very quickly produces its own momentum, its own working habits and culture, a process in which initial ideals and aspirations may be revised or diluted. As far as possible, we kept to the founding principles: at least so far as was allowed by the regulations and structures of the host institution and at least so far as was practicable, given the wide range of cultural and historical assumptions that students brought with them about higher education. For my part, I found inspiration in the University of the Future at Hamburg and in observation of several similar projects, including Schumacher College, the Centre for Human Security at Coventry (now defunct), Forum for the Future, Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership and the Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research at St Andrews. The director of that last centre, Robert Gray, offered a particularly useful piece of advice while we were campaigning for the new centre: act, he said, as if the centre already existed – issue papers and communiques, hold conferences, write on headed notepaper, do whatever the rules allow; if you like, you

might call it a 'pre-institution'. Our first conference was tiny. Nevertheless, I remember a thrilling account by Mike Hawkes of his conservation work in the forests of Nepal, facilitated by friendly Marxist insurgents.

Amongst a thousand other strands were the critical pedagogies of Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire and bel hooks; critiques of business education by Martin Parker, Mark Promislo and Robert Guccione; Sam Garrett-Jones on future universities and the triple helix and Stephen Sterling on sustainability education. I was strongly, if tangentially, influenced by the philosopher and theologian Grace Jantzen, who had recently died in Ambleside. But this is becoming a list of greatest hits – my task this morning is to tell you about our governing ethos.

A Governing Ethos

That ethos fell under five headings. The first concerned the moral, political and intellectual commitment of our courses. We must prepare managers and officials for their role in a global emergency that was an aggregation of crises in social, environmental, geographical and inter-generational justice, a collapsing global civil society and a degraded global public sphere.

The second was the principle of totality: those huge global questions and crises were present in every detail, at every level, of our lives and work: if we were to teach about sustainability leadership, we must decide what that meant for every aspect of our institutional practice. If we taught leadership as a modality of democracy, what did that mean for us, as members of this community? If we wanted a peaceful, sustainable world, what did that imply for our everyday relationships and habits? If we believed in participation and deliberation, how could that be reconciled with intellectual and tutelary authority? The least demanding consequence of that principle was that, as far as possible, the centre should itself be sustainable and low-carbon.

Following from that, the centre was to be, as far as possible given the conditions of the host university, open, participative and democratic. One kind of openness was evident in the well-attended public lectures, at first weekly, that have run now for many years. Speakers were from every sphere: they included activists, managers, social entrepreneurs, academics, environmentalists and politicians. In an early lecture, we were introduced to projects designed to keep girls and young women in education in sub-Saharan Africa; in another, we saw hard-to-recycle fire-hoses turned into luxury handbags to be sold in Harrods. We took the view that there was nothing human that could not be the object of critical inquiry under the heading of sustainability education. 'Participative and democratic' meant that everyone was to have equity in deliberations and decisions, to the extent that they wanted – and everyone meant everyone. Students, gardeners, the director, faculty, administrators, local residents and visitors all might, in addition to their prescribed roles, play some part in the policy, determinations and governance of the centre, and they did. Those deliberations were to become recursive elements of the centre's pedagogy and curriculum. On one occasion, for example, a student convened a meeting of faculty and students to discuss the quality of feedback and supervision. Nobody said 'who do you think you are, to call a meeting?' Nobody suggested that she was not the best person to run the meeting. The way she did that became a case study for us in deliberation and participatory democracy; for my part, I fully accepted her leadership and took valuable instruction from the experience. Everyone in principle, but not everyone wanted to take part, not everyone shared that commitment and some people were uncomfortable with what they saw as a weakening of academic hierarchy. We found guides to the functioning of academic authority in a non-hierarchical body in the work of John Heron (1993) and, above all, in the work of Jurgen Habermas (Habermas, 1971; 1984). A particularly useful theoretical practice can be derived from the ideas of Theodor Schatzki (2001) and their elaboration by Davide Nicolini (2012).

The fourth principle was transdisciplinarity. Inter-disciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity (and any other prefix you can think of) were assumed, although our scope for those ideals was limited by relative geographical and institutional isolation. The question 'how do we live together in peace on an overheating planet' must transcend all scholarly boundaries; it is inescapably wrapped up in questions of science, technology, international relations, geography, economics, history, sociology, ethics, politics and, not least, philosophy. Transdisciplinarity started with a collective acknowledgement that, in the face of a global

emergency whose origins lay, at least in part, in a three-hundred years long addiction to a positivist-reductionist epistemology, we must not neglect other ways of thinking. A minor example of this was a module designed specifically for those scientists who wanted to understand how social theory, hermeneutics or discourse analysis can provide valid and viable alternatives to techno-scientific solution-finding in the struggle for equity, liveability and sustainability. As Sam Garrett-Jones puts it 'disciplines are both intellectual and social structures' (Garrett-Jones, 2003): we wanted lots of hanging out together and plenty of enjoyable conferences with space for conversation.

The fifth commitment was to criticality. Part of a critical commitment must lie in acceptance that there are different ways of doing criticality. One must be ready to challenge (and to be challenged about) one's own assumptions, right down to their metatheoretical foundations; ready, furthermore, to reflect on the conditions of one's existence, and the legitimacy of one's own pedagogical and institutional claims. A significant implication of the word lies in its association with critical theory: that thought and education must seek not only to capture and understand contemporary social circumstances but to change them. At the very least, IFLAS would not show people clever ways to 'lead' or 'run' exploitative and dehumanising organisations, but would encourage them to see in those conditions the same injustice that created the climate emergency.

Leadership for Positive Change

When we talk about leadership - the 'L' in IFLAS, it is as an object of scholarly scrutiny, as a node in a wider discourse of neoliberal organising and, crucially, as the starting point for an inquiry in to the moral and political possibilities for the individual agent seeking to work in collaboration with others to bring about social change. Note that usually, in the academy, leadership is taught as an unproblematic set of skills or tricks, something that rests on the unquestioned legitimacy of organisational hierarchy and, by extension, on the subordination of a class of non-leaders. The objects of leadership form a subaltern class of 'followers' so that, generally unnoticed, the idea of leadership has become an instrument of oppression.

At worst, leadership may be said to have become a social pathology. Hyper-masculine, careless, narcissistic and psychopathic leadership has become a feature of corporations which themselves are narcissistic and psychopathic.

The UK is currently preoccupied by two scandalous failures in which leaders and managers in several companies and government bodies failed even to notice that there was a moral dimension to their decisions. In one, 72 people died in the Grenfell Tower fire because companies involved in its refurbishment falsified data about the flammability of materials and because regulators couldn't be bothered to regulate. Everybody concerned knew the risk but nobody cared or acted. In the other, hundreds of post office employees were sent to prison when a faulty computing system appeared to show that they had stolen money from their post offices. Senior managers at the post office and in the computer company were aware that this was an injustice but chose to prioritise the reputation of their corporation. If (as is scarcely conceivable) they were not aware, they were in breach of a professional duty to make themselves aware. Thousands were criminalised and at least 13 of the accused employees killed themselves. And yet, in documents (most of which have been erased from the record) every company involved in both tragedies made claims for its values-led, authentic and visionary leadership. A retrospective axiology might say that the real values in question were profit and self-preservation; that the authenticity was that special kind that allows for wholesale lying and evasion; that, so far from being visionaries, the people concerned were egregiously myopic, seeing only their own interests and the reputation of their organisation, and blind to the simplest and most obvious moral responsibilities. Our educational duty, in developing sustainability leadership, is to produce people who consciously examine the widest moral implications of their positions and actions and who see leadership not as the maximisation of profit but the practical exercise of organisational conscience. As educators, we seek to develop critically reflexive moral awareness: the leadership we teach is a form of action, not a function of personality, action that encourages participation, mutuality and dialogue for democracy and collaboration. On the way, we draw upon Kantian notions of the active citizen in a 'kingdom of ends'(Rauscher, 2016) and from there, Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984).

The SDGs have helped bring sustainability into the mainstream of organisation development, even in otherwise heedless sectors and corporations, but what is the point of greening a supply chain if a company still relies on exploited labour? What would be the point of building zero-carbon headquarters for a corporation that still refuses to allow maternity leave and applies a stop-watch to employees' toilet breaks? The biggest challenges of our time seem insuperable until we understand that the large is in the small: if we want peace and justice on a liveable planet, we must act for peace and justice in every aspect of our life and work. If we want sustainable growth and an end to poverty and inequality, we must act for fairness and equity in every aspect of our life and work. I believe that all management and leadership education should, in fact, be education for just and equitable leadership and ethically responsible management. At a time when many of the world's political leaders seem blind to a terrifying global emergency, the education and development of sustainability leadership is of supreme importance. As I speak, IFLAS remains active, although under different institutional conditions. Higher education is a high calling and we all here are fortunate to have an opportunity not only to train minds, but also to change the world.

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