

ESD Enterprise: ‘To A Better World’ or just ‘To The Record’? in Murray, A., Baden, D., Cashian, P., Haynes, K. & Wersun, A. (2015). Inspirational Guide for The Implementation of PRME (UK & Ireland Edition), Chapter 21 (pp.147-153), Sheffield: Greenleaf.

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Introduction

This story of Durham University Business School’s MBA International Enterprise Project began as a humanitarian response to the Sri Lanka tsunami in 2004. Strong links between various university departments and Sri Lanka led to establishing Project Sri Lanka, providing opportunities for staff and student volunteers to make a contribution to post-tsunami restoration and reconstruction projects.

The Nature of the Challenge

MBA students were invited to provide consultancy expertise for some of these projects, which then led to business projects being initiated by students themselves, and finally to the birth of an accredited MBA module relating to the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

The module design sought to avoid inhibiting students’ creativity or initiative-taking. Unlike most other MBA modules, it is about problem-based learning (PBL), so students initiate and take ownership of, and are responsible for developing, their own projects. So what of the teacher’s role?

“You are not the oil, you are not the air – merely the point of combustion, the flash-point where the light is born...you are merely the lens in the beam...self-effaced so that it may be focussed or spread wider...to vanish as an end and remain purely a means...[otherwise], you rob the lens of its transparency” (Hammarskjold, 1997:96).

How we addressed the challenge

Participants initially had free range to initiate their own projects including cinnamon production, eco-tourism, sustainable construction, coconut processing, fishing, and elephant sanctuaries, but the University’s insurers drew the line at leopard safari camps! In 2012, two INSEAD case studies were introduced into the module, prompting students to initiate larger corporate projects based in the capital city, Colombo, including one with a company operating eco-factories supplying M&S, and another with a company operating eco-hotels. The students are put in touch with these companies but are then responsible for working with them to develop viable projects of mutual interest which they can undertake on a 7-day field-trip, normally involving action-research and even more action-learning.

The structure of the module is based on Mintzberg & Gosling’s (2003) ‘five manager mindsets’: reflective (the way people think); worldly (the international context); analytical (management strategy & organisational dynamics); collaborative (partnerships & relationships); action (change). We added a 6th mindset: sustainability (sustainable futures). For pre-course reading we recommend Visser’s (2012) “The Quest for Sustainable Business” which *Ethical Performance* cites as “the most important and, in certain respects, the only historical account of corporate responsibility to date, and a bloody good read”!

The central theme throughout the course is “Design Thinking” (Martin, 2009) affording alternative perspectives on management education and practice, while also serving two important purposes: firstly to open up debate about intuitive thinking and the integrative values and cognitions required for sustainability literacy and “obliquity” (Kay, 2012), and secondly, to introduce students to the concept of “abductive logic” which is not only essential for innovation and creativity, but also for envisaging sustainable futures. The pluralistic context of Sri Lanka, steeped in Buddhism, also lends itself to the application of Schumacher’s (1993) “Buddhist Economics”, in other words ‘economics for sustainability’.

Learning outcomes are aligned with HEA/QAA ESD guidance on “Attributes”:

- An ability to engage in independent, evidence-based, integrated thinking (integrative cognitions)
- An understanding of values and how they influence perception (integrative values)
- A knowledge of approaches to economic development in an international context (worldly mindset)
- An ability to reflect on values, beliefs & norms, how they affect decisions & behaviours (reflective mindset)
- An ability to evaluate actions/impacts and use this information strategically (analytical mindset)
- An understanding of social and environmental responsibility and the need for transformational learning (sustainability mindset)
- An ability to take a proactive approach to change and act, even in the face of complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty (action mindset)
- An ability to engage and collaborate with, and influence, others effectively (collaborative mindset)
- The capacity to be flexible and adopt a problem-solving mindset (problem-based learning)
- The vision, motivation and resourcefulness to innovate for sustainable futures (design-thinking)

The module embraces all teaching & learning approaches highlighted in the ESD Guidance, including:

- **Case studies:** (particularly the INSEAD case studies on our host companies, supplied by ECCH);
- **Stimulus Activities:** including the “All Adrift” consensus building exercise, stories (mainly from Anthony De Mello), poetry (particularly Wendy Cope), various videos (including ‘Life In A Day’ and RSanimate);
- **Simulation:** including a collaborative group exercise on managing change and uncertainty based on the ‘Parable of the Sadhu’ by Buzz McCoy (HBR) which participants map onto a Ketso project mat;
- **Experiential project-work:** action research/learning undertaken as a mini business project in an international setting unfamiliar to the majority of participants, requiring them to step beyond their comfort zones, which they then write up as a collaborative team-work report for their assessment;
- **Place-based learning:** working with organisations that have sustainability truly embedded in their strategies and operations, students particularly learn from their models of stakeholder engagement, supply-chain management, impact assessment, sustainability literacy and reporting, and sustainability marketing.

The desired outcome is what Mintzberg (2004) calls “*experienced reflection*” fermenting into “*transformational learning*”, something that occurs “*at the interface where reflective thinking meets practical doing*” in “*that space, suspended between experience and explanation, where the mind makes the connections*”. This is synonymous with MacIntyre’s (2007) “*goods internal to practices*”, the “*goods*” in this case being “*students’ attributes, dispositions and competencies rather than just a content-based approach around ‘what has been learned about sustainability’*” (Sterling, 2012).

“It means looking in so that you can better see out in order to perceive a familiar thing in a different way” (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2003:4)

To consolidate and capture this effectively, we include a session on reflective practice, in which we encourage students to engage in deep reflective writing (and produce an individual reflective paper as part of their assessment) – this goes way beyond descriptive writing to include “emotional disclosure” (Pennebaker, 1997) which, although initially challenging, is proven to enhance intellectual performance and personal wellbeing.

“People feel that they have hardly any time for reflection, and since reflective consciousness is one defining characteristic of human nature, the results are profoundly dehumanizing” (Capra, 2003:110)

What next?

While we hope to inculcate a habit of systematic reflection, there is now an even greater imperative. This calls for reflective practice to rescue the values-based right brain hemisphere from relentless onslaught by the utility-obsessed left brain hemisphere, which McGilchrist (2010) believes to be the root cause of unsustainable behaviour resulting in environmental and cultural destruction.

We recommend further research into this potentially profound link between McGilchrist’s ‘divided brain theory’ and ESD. Also, in response to the evident need for a distinctive ‘biopsychosocial systems’ framework to defend ESD against neutralisation and co-option by the mainstream (Sterling, 2012), thereby rendering it “*virtually useless*” (Fleming & Jones, 2013), we recommend revisiting Spiral Dynamics which Haigh (2011:10) describes as “*one of the most sophisticated, comprehensive and influential theories of transformative education*” that “*offers a unifying framework that makes genuinely holistic thinking and actions possible*” (Beck & Cowan, 1996:30) .

What the ESD Guidance fails to state clearly enough, unlike Orr (1994), is that “*the crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perception, and values; hence it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions and values. It is an educational challenge. More of the same kind of education can only make things worse*” (in Marshall, et al., 2011). It could also be clearer about what is really required, i.e. a “*courageous and humble*” (Eichler, 1999) confrontation with the principles on which the currently unsustainable paradigm is founded, grappling with related paradoxes and “*troublesome knowledge*” (Meyer & Land, 2003), through an “*unflinching critical epistemology*” (Fleming & Jones, 2013) that dares to be different, risks professional and academic marginalisation, but ultimately prepares students to cross the conceptual ‘threshold’ to an alternative “*ecologically integrated paradigm*” (Boehnert, 2012) .

One leading City CEO and venture capitalist who took the module related his experience as follows:

“My expectation going into this programme was to make an impact in ways that I could relate to. I was intent on exiting from the same door I came in with my alpha male status intact. I had it all planned; I would leverage all my experience and networks that would reflect on my success and enable me to create a sense of achievement.....for me. And then.....it then dawned on me that this was not about me helping them - whoever they were - but on me reflecting on the way other people live their lives and to use this opportunity to put aside everything that I stood for. To learn, I had first to unlearn and then to trust in the ability of people I did not really know.

John planted the seed in my mind that we should dare to be different. I came out of [this module] by way of a very different, more enriching, door."

"To a better world,' he [Paul] started to say, but he cut the toast short, thinking of the people of the Ilium, already eager to recreate the same old nightmare. He shrugged. 'To the record,' he said, and smashed the empty bottle on a rock. Von Neumann considered Paul and then the broken glass. 'This isn't the end you know,' he said. 'Nothing ever is, nothing ever will be – not even Judgement Day.' 'Hands up,' said Lasher, almost gaily. 'Forward March!'" (Vonnegut, 1992:137).

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