

How dare you? Introducing Critical Pedagogy to Conceptualise the Topic of Sustainability in Executive Business Education

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by

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Since the convening of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, it is clear that the rhetoric of sustainability has no doubt come to stay. In seeking to achieve the various objectives outlined in its Agenda 21, universities appear to have played a significant role in the drive towards attaining a more sustainable world and in this, key strategies have centred primarily on the 'greening' of the higher education curriculum. Nevertheless, in this, much of the pedagogy has remained largely normative, with a focus on science and technology as major drivers of the sustainability agenda. Sadly, very little appears to have been said about the underlying issues that have over time resulted in an unsustainable world, and this has gone mostly unaddressed in the pedagogy of sustainability and environmental crisis in higher education. In this presentation, I wish to reflect on the personal and collective struggle involved in designing and delivering a module around the theme of critical sustainability at an Executive MBA programme of a local Business School, as well as the joy and enthusiasm resulting from this experience.

In light of the above, a primary challenge has had to do with embedding critical theory in teaching sustainability (as risk and ethics) to Executive MBA students. So far, we as critical management educators, have operated at the edge of a paradox created by the University's drive to 'green' its curriculum (in promoting sustainability education) on the one hand, and by our critical pedagogical orientation towards moral philosophy on the other. The latter view is based on our conviction that far from its being a solely economic-scientific problem, the sustainability crisis is a moral-ethical one. It is thus our belief that any approach geared towards resolving the ecological crisis must be fundamentally acknowledging of the fact that there can be no simplistic rational scientific solutions to a moral-ethical problem.

As such, we hold that in order to afford a more holistic view of 'the problem', embodied by the present crisis, the pedagogy of sustainability must strive to address the moral and ethical issues that have led to un-sustainability in the first place. That is, sustainability education must start from the critique of the processes that have led to an unsustainable world. These include the contemporary world order with its hegemonic structures, power inequalities and resulting social injustices; a homogenising drive for the infinite growth of capitalist production which has systematically impoverished the optimal balance of the eco-system as our life support system; as well as the marginalisation of the values of the oppressed, the invisible and the silenced.

By focusing from the very start of the course on the values, the vulnerabilities, and the ideological struggle behind the sustainability crises and the proposed solutions, it is our intention to create a rhetorical space for an emotional transition, a cognitive liberation and a collective negotiation of

shared reality among the students – one that disallows the traditional ontological separation between economic and ecological spheres. We seek to create a learning space that refocuses attention on regaining the freedom to realize one's humanity in healthy and mutually respectful relationships with others, as well as freedom from homogenising globalised industrialist capitalist paradigms that have maintained a highly instrumental and exploitative view of the earth and that fundamentally ascribe to it, little or no intrinsic value. This is a reality that ultimately confronts what may be regarded as a covert tendency to ecologically modernise contemporary capitalism, subtly disguised as 'corporate social responsibility'; it is one that argues for the re-definition of 'prosperity' and for an understanding of 'future possibilities' in such a way that it does not cost us the Earth.

I will discuss in more detail the conceptual framework that has mainly underpinned this critical pedagogic project. I will also highlight the pedagogic methods and tools that have been employed in creating the much needed space for collective and individual exposure to the ideas, and for reflection on real issues in the concrete local situations of present and lived experience. These tools include: disciplinary diversity of the teaching team (Economics, Politics, Philosophy, Law, Management, Sociology, Engineering); visual means (Drawings, Art, Poetry and Film); attention to language (particularly understanding that labels are not value-free and as such, should not be taken for granted); and the study-trip (to facilitate first-hand appreciation of nature's intrinsic value and shared vulnerability; as well as exposure, reflection and a healthy respect toward socio-cultural and ecological diversity)

Furthermore, I discuss the resistance and anxiety that such critical pedagogy often creates (among the academics and students alike), and especially how this is enacted in the classroom and beyond. Again, I re-visit the challenges of 'greening' the business school (MBA) curriculum, which is often already culturally homogenised (in the sense of dominant business paradigms, ambitions, elitist education and vested interests) despite the culturally diverse nature of the student body; I equally address the observed tensions in the choice of a critical perspective on sustainability taken by the academic team. On reflection, and in an odd way, our own experience of making such a choice (regarding the syllabus, design and delivery of the module) epitomises the issues of risk and ethics always involved in framing the sustainability crisis and its solution at a global level; for risk is always pragmatically connected with the choices made and moral responsibility.