Values and ideals in creating sustainable university place (0075)

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Introduction

In his SRHE 2010 conference submission 'Creating a sustainable university place: a research agenda', Paul Temple, following Dunphy et al. (2003), suggests that there is a need for the idea of sustainability to be internalised by individuals within an organisation. Temple proposes that achieving sustainability will be easier to manage if both students and staff come to think of the university in terms of a place that has special meaning for them.

In the outline of my associated paper, below, I take the first of these ideas, the internalisation of the concept of sustainability, as a starting point for examining the part played by values and ideals in creating a sustainable university place. I draw on the literatures of higher education and philosophy of education, and seek to connect with the conference theme *Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?* through considering the role of critical thinking, from a western and eastern philosophical perspective, in internalising the idea of sustainability.

Structure

My presentation is structured in two parts:

Firstly, I look at the relationship between values and ideals, and define sustainability as an ideal which is both inspirational and aspirational. It is an ideal which emerges from a hinterland of values, and which is denoted by certain conditions and characteristics.

Secondly, I examine the contribution of critical thinking, itself interpreted as an ideal, to the process of internalising the ideal of sustainability. I approach critical thinking from a western and eastern philosophical perspective.

Part 1

De Ruyter (2003: 474) suggests that the relationship between ideals and values is that ideals are 'not-yet-realised values'. Ideals express inspirational and aspirational values, and possess a visionary quality. They can be categorised in two ways. *Ultimate ideals* are images of excellence that are flawless, unqualifiedly perfect, unattainable and unrealisable. *Normal ideals*, on the other hand, are images of excellence that are as perfect as we can realistically expect to find, attainable, realisable, and aware of the possible imperfections of an imagined excellence.

Understanding the concept of sustainability as an ideal in each of these two different but complementary senses, ultimate and normal, is helpful in thinking about the challenges for students and staff of internalising the idea of sustainability within a higher education institution. Sustainability interpreted as an ultimate ideal is like a distant beacon which may never be reached but which continues to inspire and guide. It is a navigation aid

(Rescher, 1987). The leadership challenge here is to communicate the ideal in a way that is inspiring without being demotivating because it is ultimately unattainable. Sustainability interpreted as a normal ideal opens up diverse possibilities for taking individual and communal steps towards realising the ideal, translating it into different contexts and breaking it down into a series of local initiatives and projects. Temple alludes to some of the practical challenges involved here. The quality of the responses to both interpretations of the ideal of sustainability will affect the degree to which the university space is converted into a place that is special to its users.

When an idea is internalised it becomes part of the self, and De Ruyter (ibid.) suggests certain conditions for and characteristics of ideals that indicate their personal component. Her four necessary conditions for ideals are that:

1. They refer to ideas that a person believes to be excellent or perfect

2. The person attaches high value to these ideas

3. They are still part of his/her dream or imagination

4. They are not easily achievable but neither are they impossible to achieve

Her three characteristics of ideals are that they are:

1. Images of excellences that are not yet realised

2. Aims or goals we deeply desire to realise

3. Personal in character

I suggest that if internalising an idea and making it one's own means making it part of one's self, then knowledge in this sense also becomes self-knowledge. Internalising the ideal of sustainability – and according to De Ruyter's delineation, above, ideals have a deeply personal component - represents a movement of progressive intellectual habituation, attachment and personal ownership (Raz, 2001). Voices for knowing and being coalesce (Barnett, 2007).

Part 2

How might the process of making the idea of sustainability one's own be both understood and brought about? I suggest that one way is through the perspective and activity of critical thinking. Critical thinking about sustainability as an ultimate ideal will help to excavate the values underlying that ideal; critical thinking about sustainability as a normal ideal will generate ideas for realising those values in practical terms within specific contexts. Bailin and Siegel (2003) argue that, from a western philosophical perspective, critical thinking is a normative umbrella that refers to quality of thinking, whatever the context or activity. For example, activities such as problem solving and decision making can each be carried out in critical and uncritical ways. They maintain that critical thinking is an overriding ideal as well as a fundamental aim and primary obligation of education.

However, critical thinking is not oppositional to creative thinking. Bailin and Siegel (ibid.) argue that critical and creative thinking are different but complementary processes. Critical thinking has an imaginative component: inventing hypotheses, producing counter examples, counter arguments and envisioning potential problems are aspects of critical thinking that are generative and creative. All of these creative dimensions of critical thinking will come into play for students and staff in an organisation engaged in internalising the idea of sustainability and making it their own, both individually and collectively.

In her consideration of critical thinking in relation to Confucian theories of learning, Kim (2003) presents the process of knowledge becoming self-knowledge as the conversion of knowledge into wisdom. From an eastern philosophical perspective she argues that Confucius's theory of learning is not passive, but includes a critical thinking component in that Confucius advocates reflection in learning. Learning is a process of dual reflection in order to systematise the raw materials of knowledge into a comprehensible whole, and then to integrate them into oneself as wisdom.

References

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