

Transformative learning and sustainability: The impact of the ‘hidden curriculum (0077)

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Research Domain: Student experience

Proposal:

In this session we aim to:

- Offer fresh insights into students’ experiences of learning about sustainability in higher education
- Consider the impact of the hidden curriculum on student learning
- Discuss the potential of sustainability to act as a catalyst for transformative learning in HE

This presentation reports research carried out in a British university using video-diaries and the think-aloud method to investigate students’ experiences of learning about sustainability through the campus environment. It focuses on the messages which the hidden curriculum transmits to students through the university campus, and explores the ways and extent to which the campus impacts on student learning about sustainability. The possible implications of the findings for future development of education for sustainability in higher education are discussed.

It has been recently suggested that the campus can be regarded as a place ‘where learning occurs’ but which is, itself, ‘the source of no useful learning’ (Savanick *et al.* 2008:668). However, the impact of the ‘hidden curriculum’ on student learning has long been acknowledged (Jackson, 1968), and one element of this is the campus environment in which students live and work. Indeed, Hopkinson *et al.* (2008) perceive campus-based learning as essential for the transformative component of ESD, pointing out that, ‘The student experience at most universities typically has a fragmented connection to the values, ideals and practical aspects of living, studying or working in a sustainable way’ (Hopkinson *et al.* 2008:439). Ways in which a university’s values might be made manifest through the campus environment include availability of recycling facilities, energy-reduction measures, the extent of green travel plans, or provision of green spaces.

The researchers used an in depth case study approach to gather student perspectives on campus-based sustainability at the University of Plymouth. The primary data collection method consisted of student video diaries, utilising a ‘think-aloud’ commentary. Six students from varied disciplines were asked to make videos with a verbal commentary about their experiences of sustainability on the campus, and were asked to video-interview up to 2 friends in order to canvass a wider range of opinions. Finally, they were asked to provide a

brief video summary about what they had learnt through making the video. Once the video diaries were created and had been analysed, an interview schedule was devised which sought to investigate key themes to emerge from the diaries. Participants were then invited to attend a semi-structured interview which used a form of 'stimulated recall' (Bloom, 1954), where short clips from the video were replayed during the interview, to encourage students to describe in greater depth their learning about sustainability.

The data were analysed using an interpretive approach (supported by coding in NVivo) which aimed to understand students' individual perspectives about campus-based sustainability, but also to identify cross-cutting themes. Although generalisation in the statistical sense is not possible from such a sample, the study sought to provide wider insights into the possibilities and problems with students' perceptions of campus-based sustainability through 'theoretical inference' (Hammersley 1998). This technique draws on detailed qualitative data analysis, linking with previous research and literature in this field, to move from the particulars of a single case to a more general, theoretical-conceptual level, which is potentially applicable to other contexts.

Provisional findings indicate that the students were highly cognisant of issues around energy and carbon reduction. The 'climate change generation' who have grown up with these issues uppermost in their teaching and everyday life experiences were very alert to the strengths and weaknesses of the university's energy-saving measures. However, they were much less aware of the social and economic aspects of sustainability and found information about sustainable buildings difficult to access and hard to understand. They were largely uninformed about the university's successes in sustainability (including, currently, holding top place in the UK's Green League), and overall, they indicate that much more could be done to utilise the potential learning opportunities offered by the campus environment.

We conclude that the hidden curriculum of our institution is currently giving mixed messages about the university's values regarding sustainability. Much more could be done to close the gap between the external picture of the university, as a leader in sustainability and that transmitted to our students through the hidden curriculum. Moreover, we believe that the campus, as a learning space and as a site for socialisation, has considerable potential for transformative education which is currently under-utilised.

References:

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