5

SUSTAINABILITY CITIZENS

Collaborative and disruptive social learning

Arjen E.J. Wals and Frans Lenglet

Sustainability remains a contested concept, both normatively and scientifically, although consensus about the rapidly declining state of planet Earth seems to be growing. Even within niches, such as environmental and sustainability education, there are different interpretations and meanings associated with sustainability. To paraphrase Sterling (2004), Jickling (1992) and Dreyfus et al. (1999), sustainability is an inevitably ill-defined and an attractively vague idea with the search for sustainability a kind of treasure hunt for an infinitely illusive object. Furthermore, Huckle and Wals (2015) point to the risk of the concept becoming an extension of neoliberal interests.

In this chapter we acknowledge that there is a lot we know about what is, or at least might be, sustainable and what constitutes sustainability but, at the same time, there is a lot we do not know. The former suggests more or less robust knowledge and higher levels of confidence and agreement about what is going on and what needs to be done, ‘known sustainability’. The latter suggests that sustainability is an emergent property, an outcome of continuous learning that cannot be confidently translated into desirable behaviours or actions that can be taught, trained, transferred or prescribed, ‘unknown sustainability’, perhaps even ‘unknowable sustainability’.

This chapter presents the rationale and conditions for learning that must bridge or negotiate these vastly different aspects of sustainability. We explore the promise of methods and approaches that allow citizens to learn not just about ‘matters of fact’ but to make these facts, and the sustainability issues of which they are part, into matters of public concern and deliberation, leading to collaborative learning and even collective action. In so doing, they help to (re-)establish and (re-)vitalise substantive citizen rights.
Known, unknown and unknowable sustainability

With respect to ‘known sustainability’, sustainability consists of three hierarchically situated and dynamically interrelated dimensions: first, the biological, geological and climatological substrate and its planetary boundaries; second, the relationships between humans but also between humans and the non-human or the more-than-human world, including its ‘natural’ substrate; and third, the human-made economic, cultural, political and social structures, belief systems, institutions and instruments that shape these relationships and are shaped by them. This common description still raises questions; for instance, the reference to ‘relationships between humans and the non- or more-than-human world’ is not always well understood. Still, there appears to be a growing consensus that sustainability is ultimately about the interplay between people and ecologies.

People constantly seek to maintain or enhance the quality of their lives – a rich mix of basic and more abstract needs. The fundamental task in the coming decades is to redesign our socio-political-economic system in ways that re-integrate the dependencies between people and their underpinning ecological systems. Despite the inevitable confusion, contestation and complexity that surround sustainability, there is quite robust knowledge on each of these dimensions and, increasingly, how they are nested and influence each other. There is a lot that we do know, for instance, reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are examples of ‘known sustainability’. However, there are, and always will be, uncertainties no matter how robust the knowledge appears.

Table 5.1 juxtaposes the known and unknown, the sustainable and unsustainable in a somewhat simplistic but hopefully provocative way. We speculate that for each of the six emergent possibilities different capacities may be needed for moving towards sustainability. At the same time all six possibilities must be considered when developing sustainability citizenship.

Note there is room for some movement between the categories, i.e. what was once unknown (or known) can become known (or unknown) over time. What we thought was known might result in unanticipated effects, leading to the effects of a practice becoming less known than first thought, such as with certain fertilisers and medicines.

If ‘sustainability’ was a once-and-for-all, defined, fixed end-goal then that would restrict the scope and range of behavioural options (pathways) leading to compulsory, if not repressive, systems of enforcement, and demanding diligent, disciplined and compliant citizens. In contrast, if sustainability is seen as an emergent and continuously redefined property, the range of possibilities or pathways of actions to sustainability becomes larger. At the same time, there are objective physical boundaries and inter-subjective, constantly re-negotiated, social boundaries within which pathways need to be (re-)traced or (re-)defined, as suggested by Table 5.1.
### TABLE 5.1 A typology of (in)determinacy, sustainability and associated action possibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unsustainability</th>
<th>Sustainability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Known</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions which one knew or could have known were unsustainable at the time, and their negative effects.</td>
<td>Actions which one knows for sure are sustainable or are at least clearly more sustainable than other available options, and their beneficial effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: dumping of toxic waste in rivers, or littering plastics.</td>
<td>Example: biking to work instead of taking the car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unknown</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions which one thought were sustainable but turned out not to be so, and the delayed negative effects.</td>
<td>Actions one is engaged in for quite some time without considering sustainability, but which turn out to be sustainable, and their (originally unintended) effects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: the use of asbestos for fireproofing and insulating buildings or the use of artificial grass and rubber/Astroturf for outdoor sports.</td>
<td>Example: the use of wind-power and hiking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unknowable</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions that are unsustainable but one has no way of knowing this (at least not in the foreseeable future) or for which one does not have the resources or chooses not to allocate resources to find out.</td>
<td>Actions one engages in and which one believes are the most sustainable, given what one knows now but of which one will never know if they really are sustainable (at least not in our lifetime), and their expected beneficial effects – at least in the short term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: none, we don't know (yet) ...</td>
<td>Example: the use of solar panels and wind turbines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sustain‘abilities’

Drawing on experience, we do know much about sustainability boundaries and what is unsustainable, while increasingly knowing about what is more (or less) sustainable. Certain human qualities, pre-dispositions, bodies of knowledge and ways of knowing are recognised as being generative of becoming more sustainable in our practices. We can refer to a whole body of literature trying to describe ‘sustainability competence’ and associated abilities (Barth et al. 2007, Wiek et al. 2011). Table 5.2 shows one way of trying to describe such competences.
Table 5.2: Dimensions of sustainability competence and associated sustain'abilities'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainability competence</th>
<th>Examples of sustain'abilities'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dynamics and content of sustainability</td>
<td>• Sustainability literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Systems thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adopting an integral view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical dimension of sustainability</td>
<td>• Questioning hegemony and routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Analysing normativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Disruptiveness, transgression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change and innovation dimension of sustainability</td>
<td>• Leadership and entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unlocking creativity, utilising diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Appreciating chaos and complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adaptation, resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Empowerment and collective change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential and normative dimension of sustainability</td>
<td>• Connecting with people, places and other species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Passion, values and meaning-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moral positioning, considering ethics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of the term ‘competence’ seems particularly useful when considered a relational and emergent property manifesting when people endeavour to enact sustainability: trying things out and learning from the experience in a connected way both externally with others and internally with head-heart-hands. However, when dissected and reduced to piecemeal behaviours and indicators of such behaviour then a focus on ‘competence’ may do more harm than good. A reductionist view perpetuates mechanistic ways of thinking that can easily lead to prescribing behaviours rather than prompting the active and meaningful engagement of citizens.

Table 5.2 is not meant to be exhaustive or to read like a shopping list. Rather it highlights that there are at least four ‘dimensions’ of sustainability competence: conceptual and systemic knowledge, critical thinking, change and innovation, and an ethical or existential, normative dimension. While each dimension has its own qualities and associated sustain’abilities’, they are mutually interdependent. For example, excluding the ‘existential and normative’ dimension would leave out a set of qualities that a company wishing to expand market share, increase shareholder value and maximise growth at all cost might want in its workforce. If operationalised in isolation, many of these properties could be used for purposes that have little to do with sustainability.

The same can be said about the critical dimension: without it there is a risk that currently unsustainable systems would be strengthened rather than transformed. For example, one might consider hegemonic neoliberal forces causing a systemic ‘dysfunctionality’ that accelerates unsustainability at a global scale. Think of, for instance, the planned obsolescence of products rather than the cradle-to-cradle production process; the inequity and exploitation that is built in market-driven privatised economies rather than an economy built on cooperation and solidarity;
the reframing of human beings as consumers and lifelong workers rather than empowered producers and life-long learners; ‘straight jacketing’ education to serve the economy rather than people and planet; the built-in bias towards short-term thinking and the maximisation of profit and materialism over the striving for a dynamic equilibrium and meaningful living; the ‘cut and run’ mentality of ‘place-less’ and ‘people-less’ corporations rather than ‘place-based’ enterprises rooted in communities and their people.

It is in this world that we need to become sustainability citizens rather than just being passive inhabitants. And here is a dilemma: if we do not develop the capacities, competences and qualities needed to become more sustainable as citizens, then we are likely to remain at the receiving end of the diminishing benefits of the diminishing welfare state and the negative effects of the dominant model of social and economic organisation, while the costs of restoring or cleaning up the environmental, social and economic damages to the global commons caused by the pursuit of financial benefit expand exponentially. Individual citizens would be reduced to consuming and coping with predetermined policies and decisions, unable to formulate, voice and act on choice by deliberatively addressing collective intergenerational life-issues as opposed to the short-term satisfaction of narrowly defined commoditised individual (material and spiritual) ‘consumption’ needs.

Being a sustainability citizen cannot be left to the citizen alone. Much urban development effort is based on the flawed assumption of the capable citizen, equal before the law, with a level playing field between ‘atomic’ individuals. But individuals are not intrinsically ‘atomic’. Rather their options and actual behaviour are atomised by institutional practices and procedures and ‘democratic’ and ‘consumer choice’ ideologies over which they have little influence or control.

There are many different examples of applying deliberative democracy to ‘wicked’ situations – containing inevitable uncertainty and risk, poorly defined specifications of fact and of cause-effect relationships, conflicting and diverging norms, values and interests and contested framing and representation. To address such complex situations, we can create new spaces for collaborative and social learning that at times need to be disruptive to break away from hegemonic routines and vested powers and interests countering the wellbeing of people and planet (Barry 2005; Hopkins 2013). Being disruptive or ‘transgressive’ is an essential part of sustainability-oriented learning, partly because it can create substantive rights for formal citizens who cannot exercise their procedural rights (Lotz-Sisitka et al. forthcoming). This accords with the way Barry (2005) frames sustainability citizenship as a form of resistance citizenship existing within, and as a corrective to, unsustainable development.

Creating spaces for being and becoming a sustainability citizen

Using a rights and duties definition of ‘citizens’, citizenship assumes that all citizens use their voice and/or vote to participate in decision-making about both
TABLE 5.3 The Fox-Gilson problem typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of problem</th>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Complex</th>
<th>Wicked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Easy to solve</td>
<td>Resists solving</td>
<td>Resists defining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>A clear problem with a clear solution</td>
<td>The problem and the solution are not clear but can be understood with time</td>
<td>Problem and solution not understood and keep shifting when we try to define them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Properties</td>
<td>Predictable</td>
<td>Many familiar elements</td>
<td>Ambiguous, chaotic Many stakeholders with conflicting perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straightforward</td>
<td>Hidden root causes Non-linear Inter-operating parts affect each other</td>
<td>Many elements are hidden and unknown No right/wrong solution Not quantifiable No precedents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obvious</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Adapted from Fox and Gibson (2013)

public spaces, such as schools, universities, offices or community buildings, can encourage people entering them to ‘breathe sustainability’ as opposed to unsustainability. Does the space ‘invite’ interaction, a sense of place and identity, health promoting behaviours (such as physical movement and healthy food), participation, engagement and possibilities for agency?

An appropriate physical space alone, however, is not sufficient for being or becoming a sustainability citizen. Many, if not most, of the sustainability issues around which citizens gather and engage are of a complex or ‘wicked’ nature, as elaborated by Fox and Gibson (2013) – see Table 5.3. They and the situations in which they arise, are not easily addressed by social learning. Cultural, social, political and administrative legacies, and the ways in which they are framed, circumscribe how individual citizens or citizen groups can engage in a process of social learning. Therefore, another condition for social learning in wicked situations is to encourage, or allow, alternative ways of debating and deciding on the public cause (‘res publica’). Particular methods and procedures can be introduced, new rules of the game to help create or recreate spaces for collaborative and social learning, while resisting and disrupting hegemonic routines and vested powers and interests that are not necessarily serving the wellbeing of people and planet.

Education and learning in both formal educational institutions and in situations where people meet and work can be considered spaces in which citizen-learners are invited and encouraged to explore issues and to respond to each other’s different, divergent and even mutually-exclusive concerns. These
are spaces where issues of public concern can be made public. For example, in the words of Masschelein and Simons (2009: 237), the purpose of universities is not just about making things known (as "matters of fact") but about making them present (as "matters of concern").

Methods and approaches for deliberative social learning

There are many examples of approaches and methods encouraging citizens to actively engage in public debates about issues of common concern. They have been developed and are continuously being refined to make visible implied or hidden contestation and opposing interests. These approaches allow the various parties and stakeholders involved to recognize the facts of a complex situation, to appreciate the ‘sense’ that the different parties attach to these facts in their complexity, and to allow commonalities and, therefore, potentially common approaches and possible solutions to the issues at hand emerge.

A body of experience and insight has been accumulating over the last 20 years, especially with respect to environmental and socio-ecological decision-making and management, including social learning. An example is the ‘SLIM’ project – Social Learning for Integrated Management and Sustainable Use of Water at Catchment Scale (Blackmore et al. 2007). The heuristic that emerged from this project shows the interacting elements of a process of social learning, where ‘social learning’ refers to a process of social construction of an issue by actors whose understanding and practices change, leading to transformation of their situation through collective or concerted action (Ison 2013). It sketches a holistic, staged approach to action and change. The SLIM project acknowledges the dynamic of social learning by recognizing key interacting components: a variety of stakeholders, different or competing ways of understanding the situation, legacy conditions and methods that facilitate learning and concerted action.

Toderi et al. (2007) employed the SLIM heuristic when facilitating a social learning process about Polish and French wetlands. Ecological data introduced as ‘socio-technical objects’ were integrated into ‘dialogical tools’ and used during multi-stakeholder participatory sessions, first, to de-construct the wicked issue of wetland development and management and, second, to identify strategies for concerted action. The project initiators concluded that: ‘the underlying model ... can be effective in building relations with stakeholders for the purposes of knowledge management and for helping to elucidate competing claims around complex agro-environmental issues’ (Toderi et al. 2007: 551). The SLIM heuristic has shown its value in non-European contexts as well, such as China (Wei et al. 2012).

Wicked sustainability problems are not confined to rural areas. Urban areas are full of them. A multi-stakeholder collaborative and social learning exercise in the city of Ahmedabad (India), examined by Bharti and Bansal (2012), illustrates the experience of developing a collaborative learning approach around wicked environmental and sustainability issues in an urban setting. Ahmedabad was
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Wicked sustainability problems are not confined to rural areas. Urban areas are full of them. A multi-stakeholder collaborative and social learning exercise in the city of Ahmedabad (India), examined by Bharti and Bansal (2012), illustrates the experience of developing a collaborative learning approach around wicked environmental and sustainability issues in an urban setting. Ahmedabad was
one of the cities participating in the Supporting Urban Sustainability Program convened by the Swedish International Centre of Education for Sustainable Development (see Box 5.1).

A well-regarded non-government organisation (NGO) invited a diversity of stakeholder representatives to address the ‘sustainability’ issue of improving and managing one of the many deteriorating water bodies spread around the city of Ahmedabad. A conventional managerial approach by city administrators and planners could have been to restrict the growth of precarious dwellings next to the lake, and even to remove the inhabitants of such dwellings, to clean the lake and its surroundings and to create a city park. Instead, an unconventional process resulted in a legitimate and longer-lasting solution that would do justice to the planet (ecosystem services, water management and water quality), people (social inclusion and the quality of habitat and health) and prosperity (improved livelihoods).

After a first round of trying to appreciate the perspectives and interpretations that the various parties – including representatives of city planners, NGOs and a university – brought to the table, the newly formed multi-stakeholder team defined the main question guiding their inquiry: Working together, how can we improve the quality of life in informal settlements around water bodies and ponds in Ahmedabad?

Next, during a 12-month period, the city team participated in a series of local and international meetings and workshops (which were not without controversy and conflict) to agree on a common conceptual plan. The significant outcome was a decision that no informal settlers would be evicted even though the water body would be physically restored. In fact, the proposal was for surrounding communities to be included in the maintenance of the area, thereby creating a sense of ownership of the lake and its surroundings, and developing livelihood opportunities. The relevant local government made budgetary provisions for the redevelopment, and tenders were issued with respect to the restoration of the water body.

**Deliberate social learning process**

The learning that took place in the Ahmedabad case can be described with reference to the social learning cycle depicted in Figure 5.1 (Wals et al. 2009). This figure’s three ‘traffic signs’ are quite crucial: the one-way arrows refer to the direction in the overall learning cycle; the roundabout signs refer to the praxis of the learning cycle, simultaneous action-reflection taking place within each stage of the macro-cycle; and the two-way arrows stress the importance of linking the core actors in the macro-learning cycle with the more peripheral actors who, in one way or another, will be affected by the project and/or have the potential to influence the project at some point.

The Ahmedabad example shows the three main characteristics of a deliberatively organised social learning process. First, the process is organised as an ‘open inquiry’, i.e. without pre-defined outcomes, to which the participants
Sustainability Program for Sustainable

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BOX 5.1 The Supporting Urban Sustainability Program

The Supporting Urban Sustainability Program (2010-2014) was jointly developed by the Swedish International Centre of Education for Sustainable Development at Uppsala University, the Centre for Environment Education in Ahmedabad, India, and the Regional Environmental Education Program of the Southern African Development Community. To date, 20 city teams in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania and Vietnam have taken part. The program aims to enhance the capacity of key public, civic and private organisations to collaboratively learn about and take action with a focus on ecosystem services and poverty alleviation in cities. It is based on the following assumptions:

- There are crucial linkages between ecosystem services and poverty, also in cities.
- Investing in ecosystem services helps improve public health and livelihoods in communities.
- Cities are complex social-ecological systems; a myriad of divergent or conflicting views and interests relate to ecosystem services and poverty. Therefore, a variety of stakeholders are needed to arrive at legitimate and longer-lasting solutions.

The Supporting Urban Sustainability Program allows different stakeholders to come together as a team and engage in a joint learning-action process to tackle a sustainability issue. They represent such entities as local government, academia, non-governmental organisations, private sector firms, and media. Each city team formulates an inquiry related to ecosystem services and poverty alleviation. It guides their learning and action. It ensures ownership. It assures that issues addressed are relevant to the team. The learning-action process consists of a spiral of cycles linking knowledge creation to action on the ground. In each cycle the team engages in reflection, planning, action and data collection.

Collaborative learning takes place both within and between city teams using techniques such as mapping, story-telling, group valuation, reflection and self-evaluation. External facilitation helps in establishing trust and co-creating of knowledge among the stakeholders. The teams have access to support from a community of researchers and experts in the partner network.

Source: data drawn from Westin et al. (2013, 2014)
are invited and in which they actively engage. Together, they create an environment of collaborative learning around the issue at hand while, at the same time, learning from and about themselves and each other. Second, this process is cyclical and reflexive. It follows a repeated sequence of assessment, work planning and data gathering, sense making and reflection, until the contours of a concerted ‘resolution’ have crystallised. Third, representatives of concerned stakeholders participate, such as local government, civil society organisations, private sector organisations, academia and media.

The success of this type of learning depends a great deal on the collective goals shared by those engaged in the process. Whether such collective goals can be achieved depends, at least in part, on whether possible conflicts, oppositions and contradictions are allowed to surface and become explicit. In social learning the conflicts and their underlying sources are explicated rather than concealed (Wals et al. 2009). By deconstructing the oftentimes diverging norms, values, interests and constructions of reality that different participants bring to a sustainability challenge, it becomes possible not only to analyse and understand the roots and persistence of the challenge, but also to begin a collaborative change process in which shared meanings and joint actions emerge to contribute to forging sustainability. When done ‘right’, creating space for this type of learning and facilitating such learning will allow for sustainability citizens to emerge, but the approach places high demands on the role and capacities of facilitators, as summarised in Box 5.2.
BOX 5.2 Facilitation qualities in social learning processes aimed at sustainability

The facilitator has a crucial role as someone who:

- keeps the learning process open (ensures access to the process, openness regarding the agenda, transparency of the process)
- creates social cohesion and a pleasant atmosphere (physically, socially, psychologically)
- guarantees basic levels of comfort and safety (protection against risks resulting from participation)
- knows how to deal with conflicts that arise
- monitors progress (including the ‘soft’ results in terms of people’s learning, social cohesion, motivation, commitment, etc. along with the more concrete ‘socio-ecological outcomes’ such as increased biodiversity, reduced CO₂ emissions, improved health, etc.)
- can articulate and show how progress has been made
- ensures sufficient stimuli, challenges and a ‘sense of urgency’ to keep energy levels high
- can keep the focus on the choices that have been made and the path that has been chosen, but is also able to invite the group to reflect on those choices and to challenge them to leave it as circumstances might change.

The process facilitator must also make sure there are suitable work styles (role-playing, excursions, simulations, etc.), materials (flip-overs, apps, image material, PowerPoint, etc.), feedback mechanisms (newsletter, website, progress reports, blogs, tweets), and he or she will also have to monitor the external relations (contacts with those granting subsidies, the environment of the process, interested outsiders). Furthermore, a process facilitator is a good listener, sensitive to signs (political, emotional), a good manager/organiser, breeds trust, is a good navigator in areas of tension, a good discussion leader, an animator and has no hidden agenda. It is not always necessary that all these responsibilities and qualities can be found within one single person, they can also be distributed among multiple people who complement each other.

Conclusion

In terms of human agency and capacity, sustainability ultimately has something to do with our ability to sustain. But what, why and how to sustain are critical questions not easily answered as the world rapidly changes, knowledge becomes quickly obsolete, and values and interest shift, as do the powers that drive them. We have suggested that the indeterminacy of sustainability coupled with the normative position of having a moral responsibility of taking care of people
and planet in ways that sustain quality and dignified life for all including non-human species, now and in the future, calls for new forms of learning and new competencies and qualities.

Sustainability is an emerging property of an on-going learning process, rather than an agreed-upon outcome that can be comfortably and authoritatively prescribed, transferred or taught. Therefore, we need to focus our attention on the physical, social, cultural and psychological spaces and conditions, such as levers, barriers and support mechanisms that make such learning possible in the first place. These learning spaces and conditions should allow for critiquing and even subverting existing frameworks, frames, institutions, rules of the game, procedures and patterns that have established themselves over time and may have been useful in the times they were conceived but now turn out to be inherently unsustainable.

A sustainability citizen is one who is able to interrogate resilient unsustainability and who can participate in the co-creation of new systems and associated practices that appear, at least for the moment, more sustainable than the ones in need of replacement. Clearly this demands more than the ability to adapt to changing circumstances due, for instance, to climate change or, in light of such changes, to become more resilient as an individual or as a community. Rather sustainability citizenship requires the capacity to disrupt and transgress prevailing, dominant and unquestioned frameworks and systems that preclude and structure social and economic behaviour. This capacity is not emphasised much in the current discourse around sustainability governance or in circles connected to education and learning in the context of sustainable development. By stressing disruptive capacity building and transgressive learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al. forthcoming), the focus shifts away from learning to cope with the negative and disempowering effects of current hegemonic ways of ‘producing’, ‘consuming’ and ‘living’ to address the root causes of unsustainability and to support the quest for morally defensible, ethical and meaningful lives.

How to ‘design’ spaces for this type of learning and capacity building is an interesting question. We know that breaking hegemonic systems and routines will require creative and energising solutions that can generate a force strong enough to create expansive niches or pockets of transformation that can, with time, become new ‘regimes’ that may shift the entire ‘landscape’ (Geels and Schot 2007). Diversity and so-called boundary crossing serve creativity. Diversity, in and by itself, is an insufficient community characteristic to automatically engender creativity. Without social cohesion, diversity can become a source of conflict, driving people apart by deepening cleavages and entrenching boundaries.

Learning for transitioning to sustainable practices usually takes place within a continuum. At one end, like-minded and self-motivated people gather around an issue in opposition to existing structures, powers and patterns. At the other end, orchestrated ‘participation’ is arranged by the powers that be, giving a semblance of ‘inclusiveness’ and openness to alternatives. Most activities occur
somewhere in between these two extremes, where finding common ground, nurturing and giving voice, allow for negotiating alternative forms of decision-making and exercising power.

The responsibility and possibility for sustainability citizenship clearly does not only lie with citizens, both individually and collectively, but also with the amount of space for critique, dialogue and participation that society at large allows or encourages. The emergence of sustainability citizenship will be greatly enhanced by the emergence of a sustainability culture embracing social learning.

References


