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Sustaining Commitment to Social Responsibility: Renewing the Ethical Basis of the Quality Agenda in the Education of Adults

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Abstract: This paper seeks to extend the notion of quality in higher education by considering the agenda for environmental sustainability and underlying ethical practices. Education institutions should be committed to the extended version of quality, and should not lose sight of the importance of commitment and social responsibility in the drive for a quality kitemark.

Extending Quality

The quality agenda for adult and higher education in the last decade or more has been set by the manufacturing and business sectors. In the process, the language and culture of adult, further and higher education have been transformed: students have become customers; learning has become a product, and education is measured in terms of outputs. The sector has been driven by the need to demonstrate efficiency, economy and effectiveness. Effectiveness - the focus on impact - has been measured in terms of short-term benefits (regardless of longer-term damage). The system of accountability has no patience for longer-term projects, or changes that invariably take generations to effect. This transformation has had an impact on both students and teachers in an environment that is characteristically competitive. Capitalist hegemony has sustained itself through the appropriation of not just human labor, but fundamental cultural values, to the point where adult educators have had to hide their radical agenda in the background in order to survive.

In an earlier AERC paper,¹ I argued that in this context, if we must have efficiency and effectiveness, then we should not be uncritically reactive, and that we should add a third 'E' - equity. In this paper, I shall provide evidence derived from my own research as well as from a reading of the literature and texts, from both the world of business and the world of education, to demonstrate that the time has come to add two more 'Es' - ethics and environment. We now have opportunities to reinvent the radical agenda. We are aware that environmental concerns have been incorporated into the capitalist agenda. We might be cynical in concluding that these are not ethical concerns based on basic human values, rights and responsibilities. Rather, there is recognition that capitalism depends on the exploitation of natural resources, and extraction without replacement threatens the substructure of the capitalist economy. Nevertheless, ethical businesses are at least wishing to appear to be taking the environment seriously, and whatever their initial motivation, the educative aspects of their concerns are leading to the production and implementation of ecological mission statements. Part of this concern is the dimension of ethical investment, as businesses and companies take responsibility to ensure that their investments are being utilized ethically without exploitation of cheap or child labor. These views have been incorporated as a social responsibility towards the local community, as part of the global economy.

Beyond ecology, there is an ethical human resource issue. An analysis of the literature reveals a refocusing on the well-being and development of the human resource. Again, we could be cynical about investment in people, but the evidence gives the appearance of a commitment to responsibility for workers and their families. Businesses and companies are (re) turning to benevolence. Rights and responsibilities extend to ensuring that workers are appropriately remunerated for their labor, that their working conditions reach increasingly higher standards, and job satisfaction is enhanced. In short, that the quality of life for workers and their families needs to be continuously improved. For those that do not work, opportunities need to be created to enable the same quality of life to be made available for all to make a contribution to community benefit.

An important element of the improvement of quality of life is a renewed emphasis on the encouragement of learning, not just in the interests of the economy, but for its own sake. In the so-called 'learning society' there has to be a culture which values all kinds of learning, and not just employment and job skills training.

Commitment to Environmental Sustainability

Unlike the demand for efficiency and effectiveness from without, there is a longstanding commitment to sustaining the environment within adult education. Courses in environmental science, conservation, countryside management, ecology have long been part of the curriculum of adult education in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.² Whilst the research basis for this curriculum has a much longer history outside adult education, there have been research papers at adult education conferences which address 'green issues' and the need to commit the profession to raising awareness and engaging in (participative) action research to bring about environmental improvements. For example, at the 1990 SCUTREA Conference, a paper on European policies pointed to the responsibilities of adult educators to help their communities to 'cope with' environmental issues facing not just Europe but the rest of the world.³ Five years later, Counihan drew the attention of the conference to 'the explosion in environmental professionalism' and the fact that much of this work was now taking place outside of the liberal tradition, but as part of continuing professional development. Paradoxically, he argued, this has led to only marginal success in developing renewable energy sources; indeed, in some areas of ecological concern - especially air and water pollution - there had been a continuing deterioration.⁴ At the same conference, Knight argued for the need for scientists in adult education to support ecology and conservation issues, through environmental pressure groups: 'Continuing education has a key role to play in maximizing the effectiveness of a large non-professional input into the collection of scientific data, a vital part of the process of indicating nature conservation 'value.'⁵ By working with volunteers, continuing education provides more than an opportunity for research data collection, but may encourage the participants to take greater control of the scientific process they are engaged in. Much community development work undertaken over an even longer time-span can be seen from within this framework (for example, tackling problems of soil erosion in order that communities in developing economies can sustain themselves and not be dependent on the developed world).

Typically, Europe and the UK are a decade behind North America in responding to trends and global issues. That was certainly the case in responding to both work-based learning and quality

assurance. However, in looking at environmental concerns, the gap does not appear to be so significant; if anything, the rest of the world is slightly ahead of the United States on this front. At same AERC that I was arguing to extend quality to include equity, there was a paper by Matthias Finger and Roger Hiemstra which reported the findings of a survey on environmental adult learning. The footnote is significant as it points out that Finger is a visiting professor from Switzerland, and Hiemstra 'became involved as a consultant to help derive North American implications.'⁶ There was very limited attention to environmental issues at subsequent issues. However, there was an interesting debate on the notion of Total Quality Management initiated by Fred Schied and his associates⁷ This debate very much focused on the limitation of TQM in recognizing the need to show respect for people. This paper is arguing that the 'respect for people' needs to go beyond the human resource in the workplace, to the world communities.

At last year's AERC there were two papers on environmental concerns. The first was by Robert Hill,⁸ examining how a grassroots, self-organized group of women ('housewives') took on a large corporation in a contest for cultural authority over an environmental pollution issue. The second was by Lilian Hill, who used the notion of global consciousness to recognize that a change is taking place in that 'the advent of new scientific knowledge and the overwhelming evidence of negative consequences including environmental degradation, displacement and exploitation of people, extensive pollution, and the dissociation of people from the community and the earth that sustains them.' Lilian Hill's position emphasized the significance of global consciousness in providing a means of understanding 'the degradation, the increasing poverty and displacement of people around the world alongside the increasing wealth for a few, backlash against immigration and minority rights, increasing fundamentalism, and many others ills visible today.'⁹ The notion of global consciousness stresses the 'interdependence and connections with humankind and the earth'.

This view echoes that presented in a symposium on environmental adult education at the SCUTREA international conference in 1997. Papers by Budd Hall, Edmund O'Sullivan, Darlene Clover and Shirley Follen,¹⁰ all from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, reinforced the need to recognize that the 'world is not OK' and that we as adult educators have a responsibility to engage in what is in effect 'transformative learning' and social action in order to improve the quality of life for the world's populations.

Contradiction and critique

The local and the global are in a contradictory and dialectical relationship with each other. Global issues need local strategies. To engage with issues of environmental sustainability requires both global awareness and local action. The notion of contradiction provides a framework for the analysis of the process of social transformation. In the past, the notion of care for the community and social responsibility has been appropriated by capitalist hegemony for shoring up enterprise and economy. Having transformed the values through analytic individualism, an emphasis on ecology, environment and ethics is now returning, with a concomitant renewal of social commitment through global consciousness.

The private and the public are in a contradictory and dialectical relationship with each other. Education, in the public sector, has had to engage with quality strategies that have emerged from

within the private sector, with its own distinctive culture and values. This has stimulated resistance to, for example, ISO9000. The paradox is that in extending quality to include both environmental sustainability and ethics, we must continue to look to the private sector for direction.

What do Ben and Jerry's, McDonalds, 3M International, Body Shop International, Starbucks and Glaxo Wellcome all have in common? They all purport to be 'ethical businesses'. This means they have both an ethical policy and an ecological mission statement. It means that they undertake both ethical and environmental audits, and report the results publicly, using recognized social accounting procedures. It means they work in partnership with other ethical businesses, their customers and their own employees in order to ensure they deliver values. They uphold their values. They act responsibly in their local and global communities, and engage in practices that protect the environment and sustain ecology. It means that their quality perspective has been broadened out from efficiency and effectiveness, to consider issues of equity, ethics and environment. This will include not only ensuring that their employees have opportunities to engage in lifelong learning, but that their families are also considered in employment practice decisions (for example, changing hours of shifts, or being asked to work overtime), an awareness of where their banks are investing their funds, a consideration of where in the quality chain their raw materials come from and whether the workforce that produce them are being exploited, and whether in the extraction or production of those raw materials that the environment is being damaged. Profit ceases to be the main factor in their business planning. Ethical organizations are also concerned to ensure that they provide community benefits over and above the product or services they are set up to provide. In short, they must demonstrate that they are adding value.

In Britain, both the further and higher education sectors have responded to the 1992 United Nations's Agenda 21. A number of universities have now committed themselves to the HE21 document¹¹ that the previous and current British governments have encouraged following the 1993 Toyne Report and its government review in 1996. The fact that the emphasis is on 'education as a critical tool which can improve the capacity of people to address environment and social issues' does not necessarily align education (as opposed to educational) institutions to this agenda. After all, as I have argued elsewhere, education institutions rarely display the characteristics of 'learning organizations'.¹² However, some 25 British universities successfully bid in the Spring of 1997 to partake in the Environmental Action Fund - a two-year HE21 project to generate and promote best practice for sustainability across the higher education sector. A pre-condition for entering the HE21 partnership was senior management commitment to the project and its outcomes, which include developing appropriate curriculum specifications covering the core learning agenda for sustainability (in the areas of business, engineering, design and teacher education at undergraduate level) as well as an agreed set of sustainability indicators tailored to the HE sector.

A recent survey of 470 British Further Education colleges undertaken on behalf of the Association of Colleges in London in June 1998 found that of the 114 (24%) that replied, 61 (54%) had a formal policy on green issues, with a further eight (15%) stating that they were in the process of developing one. Around a quarter of the respondents provided evidence that they were integrating green issues into learning programs. Twenty-four colleges (21% of responses) stated that they were developing environmental and ethical sustainability within their key skills

provision for all students. Their routine undertaking of environmentally-friendly practices, however, such as energy saving, waste disposal and recycling still had some way to go. New build policies at least reflected the government legislation on building standards.

In addition, there are a range of centers and other bodies committed to working in partnership with F/HE institutions towards environmental sustainability, such as Forum for the Future, the Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research, and SustainAbility which has an international profile. In the United States, the Associated Colleges of the South are renowned for their program of workshops on environmental studies, and other bodies such as Second Nature: Education for Sustainability and the Alliance for Sustainability through Higher Education are working with higher education to promote ethical and social accounting.

Commitment and responsibility, not kitemark

Whilst all this might seem encouraging, that both HE and FE sectors in Britain and North America have a degree of awareness of environmental sustainability issues, there are indications that, like the quality agenda, these concerns are superficial and driven by marketing - the desire for a kitemark that indicates to the world at large that they are quality institutions. The quality agenda lost its way when organizations allowed themselves to be driven by factors such as accountability and competition rather than the professional imperative to provide the best quality learning opportunities for students, to bring about direct and indirect community benefits, to be sound employers, and to contribute to the regeneration of the local, regional, national and international economy. For quality it was ISO9000. For environmental management systems it is ISO14001 or the European Community's Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS). There are other alternatives such as the Council for Economic Priorities Social Accountability 8000 (SA8000) - the first auditable global standard for ethical sourcing.

It is the contention of this paper that the desire to extend quality beyond efficiency and effectiveness into equity and environment has an ethical basis that should make quality kitemarks unnecessary. Instead of investing resources into registration and consultancy fees, organizations committed to an agenda of social responsibility ought to be investing more in current and future human resources through the development of an extended quality culture. This requires a stronger focus on the ethical basis of intervention and practice, and the development of global consciousness. In North American adult education there has been a longer history of concern for the ethical basis of practice.¹³ In Britain, this ethical practice has been understood to be an uncritical and unreflective acceptance of the distinctive basis of professional practice.

A critical perspective has to sustain the social transformation that is extending the quality agenda to include commitment and social responsibility, as well as inviting a discussion on what it means precisely to be an ethical organization. This analysis needs to be applied to providers of education and training opportunities. At the same time a critical review of recent policies and research on sustainable ecological improvements, and the role of education in promoting those issues will enable us to decide whether the possibilities of extending the quality agenda are a feasible and desirable way forward.

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