Wednesday, June 1, 2016

The first day of this kick-off meeting is a scientific board meeting. The aim is to gather the international partners and those UGent partners with interest/expertise in sustainability education research in order to explore and develop opportunities for further research collaboration.

Thomas Block welcomes the participants at the Centre for Sustainable Development (CDO – Centrum voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling). In his presentation, he highlights how CDO approaches sustainable development as a political issue both in its research and education activities. Hence the focus of this ITN on teaching and learning in the face of wicked socio-ecological problems. Next, he explains how the think-tank ‘Transition UGent’ contributed to agenda setting for sustainability education at Ghent University and concludes his introduction with some reflections on the lessons learnt from this process.
Katrien Van Poeck continues with a presentation of ‘the making of’ this ITN. She outlines the coming about, aims and focus of the network, its trans-disciplinary constitution, and intended activities in the domains of research, education and services to society. Next, she gives an overview of on-going research collaboration within the ITN: joint publications, research applications, a symposium at the ECER conference in Dublin (August 2016).

Jeppe Læssøe presents one of these joint publications: the paper ‘An exploration of sustainability change agents as educators in non-formal learning settings. Mapping a varied landscape.’ The feedback of the other participants will be very helpful for the authors to finish this article and brings about an interesting discussion on the relation between learning and change and the role of different kinds of change agents therein. We are convinced that an analysis of processes such as ‘Transition UGent’ from this perspective would be highly relevant.

After lunch, Leif Östman and Katrien Van Poeck present one of the contributions to the ECER-symposium ‘Teaching and learning in the face of wicked socio-ecological problems’: the paper ‘Urban sustainability transitions as spaces for experiential learning’. Again, valuable feedback and an inspiring discussion follow the presentation. We go on with exploring interesting perspectives and raising challenging questions about the relation between (collective) learning and change and we agree that bringing together theoretical and analytical frameworks from different disciplines (i.c. transition studies, political theory on new arrangements of governance and pragmatist educational theory) holds great potential for progressing research on sustainability education and related fields.

We close the day with exploring and developing ideas for future research collaboration within this ITN. Shared interests are the focus on the wickedness of sustainability issues and how to deal with that in education, the relation between learning and change, exploiting the trans-disciplinary setting of this ITN, empirical research on sustainability in higher education, and establishing fruitful interactions between education (pilot experiments at UGent) and sustainability education research.
Thursday, June 2, 2016

On the second day of this kick-off meeting, we focus on teaching and learning in the face of wicked sustainability issues within Ghent University education. We present and discuss on-going sustainability education initiatives at UGent, challenges regarding the integration of sustainability in UGent education and we further explore opportunities for fruitful collaboration between Ghent University and the international partners in view of addressing these challenges.

Frederik De Decker, head of the International Relations Office which launched the call for ITNs, welcomes the participants with a presentation on sustainability and internationalization in higher education. Next, after a short presentation of the ITN for the participants that did not attend the first day, several on-going initiatives and experiments regarding integrating sustainability in UGent education are presented and discussed.

Michiel Dehaene presents the project ‘Jokerweek’ for students in the ‘MSc Engineering: Architecture’ and ‘MSc Urbanism and Spatial Planning’ programmes. It would be interesting to conduct a case study on this extraordinary education practice and analyse the kind of learning that takes place there.

Next, Brent Bleys presents one of the pilot cases in an on-going education innovation project at UGent: further embedding sustainability in the curriculum of the Bachelor and Master in Business Administration. This project, too, would be an interesting case for relevant empirical research. One of its aims is to create and implement an integrated ‘storyline’ on sustainable development throughout the curriculum. Is a common storyline feasible and desirable? Or might it be more interesting to articulate different perspectives? A discourse analysis of textbooks and course material, for example, could help identifying dominant storylines and reveal to what extent sustainability concerns are coherent or at odds with the dominant discourses in the curriculum.

For lunch, we have a pick nick in a ‘Living Street’ (‘Leefstraat’) while we can see and hear how residents of Ghent experiment with the street of their dreams. A (co)creative and democratic learning setting?
In the afternoon, we split up in two subgroups for a discussion on how this ITN progress can sustainability education at UGent and how UGent pilot experiments can serve as a ‘living lab’ for sustainability education research. The participants raise two topics that they want to further explore:

1) What can we learn from concrete experiments such as the Jokerweek and the Business Administration curriculum reform and how can such practices be scaled-up?

2) How can insights from sustainability education research help re-designing the university-wide optional course ‘Sustainability Thinking’?

Both groups decide also to address, within these discussions, three issues of shared interest that have repeatedly been highlighted the past 1,5 day: the wickedness of sustainability issues, the relation between change and learning, and how educational research can function as a critical friend to sustainability education practice at the university.

**Learning from and scaling-up experiments**

Several dimensions of (the challenge of) wickedness have been discussed:

- The related research questions and the importance of crafting action research around it (aspects of wickedness and the relation change-learning)
- How different disciplines come to wickedness: teaching the history of disciplines...
- The importance of designing a particular space – meeting around wickedness. This involves:
  - room for experiment – meaning of experiment
  - dialogic space / pluralism / multiperspectivism...
  - crafting the inside outside relationship
  - curatorship and normative choices
  - accommodating different roles (beyond the student as student)
  - different identities / citizenship....
  - time
  - with or without output/purpose
  - particular – universal
  - irreducible uncertainty / disagreement
  - complexity
  - ‘threats’

**University-wide optional course ‘Sustainability Thinking’**
Thomas Block starts with presenting the course as it is organised now. In the discussion that follows, diverse thoughts and suggestions are raised:

- It is important to clearly formulate and have a broad view on the aims of such a course. For instance, what should the students learn? They can learn intellectually (e.g. knowledge) but also argumentatively (e.g. learning to participate in argumentation and deliberation) and ethically or emotionally (e.g. learning to be engaged).
- Such a broad perspective on different dimensions of learning is particularly important in the context of teaching and learning about wicked sustainability problems which is, basically, a matter of dealing with dilemmas, ambivalence, controversy, disagreement... There are no right solutions that can be taught. It is often a matter of exemplary learning (Negt, Klafki) and contextualising which involves cognitive, emotional, political and moral challenges.
- Examples of inspiring practices at other universities / in other fields are given:
  - In Wageningen, a course on sustainability starts explicitly from students’ own concerns. A distinction is made between different kinds of sustainability issues: known sustainability, unknown sustainability, known unsustainability, and unknown unsustainability. Diverse teaching methods are used: lectures, field visits, debates, personal reflection, group work (e.g. designing a change strategy), etc. What is often missing, is reflection on values and ethics.
  - In the Business Administration programme, a course on sustainable development is taught for a group of 200 students that are not always very interested or intrinsically motivated. They get the assignment to write a paper in which they discuss a sustainability problem and have to set 2 policy aims.
  - The method of ‘flipped classroom’ can be interesting to work on concrete projects from an action perspective. Students can then experience the wickedness of sustainability problems (which is potentially dangerous: we should be aware of that) and choose projects on issues about which they are personally concerned.
  - Role play can be another interesting method to take the wickedness of sustainability issues to the course level.
- Beyond giving suggestions and advice on teaching methods, didactic / sustainability education research can take on the – probably more interesting – role of providing insights in scientific knowledge and theoretical ideas that can help university educators to reflect on and (re-)design their own courses. This ITN, combining a focus on research and education, is a promising setting in this respect.
- Academic courses should remain academic: they are a matter of ‘learning from sustainable development’ rather than ‘learning for sustainable development’.
- Some challenges have been emphasised: How to balance technical, disciplinary information and crossing disciplinary boundaries? How to ensure enough time? How to deal with large class groups that make interactive teaching difficult?
- There is a need for in-service training for university educators, across disciplines, on didactic aspects of sustainability education. It would be very valuable to organise a training programme that combines didactic/theoretical knowledge, inspiring examples and interesting methods and offers university educators the opportunity to share experiences and learn from each other.

Friday, June 3, 2016
The last day of the kick-off meeting focuses on services to society. We explore opportunities for bridging gaps between theory and practice/policy and focus on the challenge of making universities more sustainable and socially relevant.
Riet Van de Velde gives a presentation about UGent’s Green Office (‘Duurzaamheidkantoor’) as a way to engage students in the transition towards a sustainable university. This initiative is then discussed as an interesting example of a transformative social learning process in line with the ‘Whole Institution Approach’ that is put forward in UNESCO’s Global Action Programme (GAP) on sustainability education.

Next, Guillaume Tuytschaever presents ‘community service learning’ (CSL), one of Ghent University’s strategic actions. Acknowledging and emphasising the value of this initiative, a discussion follows on the tension between, on the one hand, small-scale (niche) projects such as CSL that try to involve students in ‘real civic needs’ and, on the other, the dominant academic paradigms and practices. Have universities not always, inevitably, been involved in society – be it in sustainable, desirable, socially relevant... ways or otherwise? Shouldn’t we make more efforts to shift the focus of whole universities towards societal needs and challenges?

Erik Paredis gives the last presentation of this kick-off meeting, showing how insights from sustainability transition studies may be helpful to progress (research on) sustainability education. Frameworks such as the multilevel perspective on sustainability transitions, for example, cannot only be interesting subject content for sustainability education but also prove helpful to address questions such as how ‘niche’ initiatives (e.g. the presented pilot experiments) can be scaled-up and/or be related to transformations of the dominant ‘regime’ of sustainability education at universities.
After an evaluative and concluding discussion on the potential of this ITN and prospects and priorities for the future (outcome: see below), we close the kick-off meeting with a lunch and field visit to a sustainable community development project in the ‘Rabot’ neighbourhood.

Feedback on the kick-off meeting and the potential of this ITN

- **The trans-disciplinary focus and setting/constitution of the ITN is highly appreciated.** We are all forced to get out of our comfort zone by closely collaborating with people from other fields and this is considered very educative and inspiring.

- The many initiatives to make Ghent University more sustainable – in the domains of education, research and management + at the level of the whole institution, programmes and courses – make this ITN interesting in terms of empirical research. **UGent can serve as a kind of ‘living lab’** in which **sustainability education researchers – as critical friends** – can conduct many relevant case studies. The links with international partner institutions create possibilities for comparative research.

- To make the interaction of research and education really interesting, we have to **move beyond a knowledge transmission approach**. It is an illusion that ‘best practices’ can be transferred/copied to other contexts. Let’s jointly engage in both sustainability education theory and practice, and try to learn collectively from that.

- There is a need for **in-service training for university educators** on teaching about wicked sustainability issues to which this ITN could contribute. The available and developed insights, expertise, experiences… can also be shared with practitioners outside UGent (e.g. teacher training, educators in other higher education institutions).

- We cannot focus at everything at the same time. Let’s narrow the scope and set some **priorities**. Which fields of interest are the most relevant? Where do we want to improve/contribute? Key issues seem to be the wickedness of sustainability problems (which is not thoroughly addressed in sustainability education research) and the relation between (collective) learning and change.
Often, researchers and educators in different settings (places, disciplines...) spend a lot of time and energy on **reinventing the wheel**. This network can be a fruitful vehicle to avoid that and to learn from each other, inspire each other’s practices, share experiences and expertise, etc.

We have to decide how often we shall meet, how to organise the **ITN meetings** and what we will do in-between them. Suggestions for future meetings:

- First and foremost: Keep on like you have started. It was very fruitful.
- Stimulate interaction through subgroup discussions, work in pairs, etc.
- Let’s share some responsibilities and divide the work
- Please don’t split up education and research: it is so interesting to learn from each other, to co-create tailor-made teaching and learning practices and build a sort of learning network around it

This kick-off meeting has been highly productive in terms of generating ideas on what should be done. How can we proceed even more productively by actually doing it? This will require **funding** and **prioritising**.

Let’s continue to share expertise, insights, research interests, experiences... and a Belgian beer now and again :)

**Suggested short-term actions**

- If we want to exploit this ITN’s potential as a living lab for trans-disciplinary, empirical research on teaching and learning in the face of wicked sustainability problems, it is very important to obtain additional resources to make that happen. Writing and submitting **joint research applications** should be a priority in the first years of the network.

- It is important to document what is going on in the ITN. A good **website** is a vital tool for this network. Future empirical research will be communicated in scientific literature but it would also be valuable to engage in broader communication of the results (e.g. policy briefs, summaries of articles in laymen’s terms).
Let’s kick-start joint conceptual work (what do wicked problems mean in/for the field of sustainability education?) and the documentation of empirical cases with writing a (pivot) book that outlines the theoretical background and empirical/practical context of the ITN.

We should share interesting research literature on topics related to this ITN’s focus in order to build a common knowledge base and vocabulary.

Focus and priorities

- **Trans-disciplinary action research:**
  - UGent as a ‘living lab’: pilot experiments (e.g. Jokerweek, curriculum development business economics, university-wide elective course), Transition UGent, Green Office...
  - Sustainability education research as a critical friend: empirical research, theoretical underpinning
  - Beyond consultancy, knowledge transmission: co-creating teaching and learning practices + learning network
  - This requires extra resources. We can proactively set some priorities, but in practice the priorities will probably ‘follow the money’

- Theoretical focus:
  - Wicked sustainability problems
  - Relation between (collective) learning and change

- **In-service training and learning network** for (university) educators + share lessons learnt with practitioners outside university

Action plan 2016-2020

2016

- 3-day kick-off meeting: 1-3 June 2016, Ghent
- Summer school ‘Doctoral Studies in Environmental and Sustainability Education: contextualising the process’, 2-5 August, the University of Cambridge
- In-service training for UGent educators and educational staff: ‘Education innovation project “Sustainability in education”: lessons learnt and inspiration for other courses and programmes’
- Educational board meeting: presenting and discussing potential pilot experiments and exploring possibilities for inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration
- Valorisation: training for practitioners outside university, policy- and practice-oriented R&D...
- Joint research applications!!!
- Joint publications

2017

- 3-day ITN meeting
- Pilot experiments: building on on-going initiatives: trans-disciplinary thesis seminars, business economics, studio urban planning, university-wide course ‘sustainability thinking’, electromechanical engineering...
- ECER, 21-25 August 2017, Copenhagen: trans-disciplinary symposium/workshop/roundtable
- World Environmental Education Congress (WEEC), 9-15 September, Vancouver: trans-disciplinary symposium/workshop/roundtable
- Training course for UGent educators on sustainability in university education
- Study visit to CEMUS, student-led education on sustainability at Uppsala University
- Studium Generale: ‘Sustainable university’
- Summer school
- Valorisation: training for practitioners outside university, policy- and practice-oriented R&D...
- Joint research applications!!!
- Joint/comparative case studies
- Joint publications

**2018**
- 3-day ITN meeting
- Pilot experiments: initiating and supporting new initiatives
- ECER: trans-disciplinary symposium/workshop/roundtable
- Training course for UGent educators on sustainability in university education
- Valorisation: training for practitioners outside university, policy- and practice-oriented R&D...
- Summer school
- Joint research applications
- Joint/comparative case studies!!!
- Joint publications
- ...

**2019**
- 3-day ITN meeting
- Pilot experiments: follow-up
- ECER: trans-disciplinary symposium/workshop/roundtable
- Training for UGent educators on sustainability in university education
- Exploring opportunities for interdisciplinary, international master programme
- Valorisation: training for practitioners outside university, policy- and practice-oriented R&D...
- Summer school
- Joint research applications
- Joint/comparative case studies!!!
- Joint publications
- ...

**2020**
- 3-day ITN meeting
- Pilot experiments: follow-up
- ECER: trans-disciplinary symposium/workshop/roundtable
- Training for UGent educators on sustainability in university education
- Exploring opportunities for interdisciplinary, international master programme
- Valorisation: training for practitioners outside university, policy- and practice-oriented R&D...
- Summer school
- International conference ‘Sustainability Education Teaching and learning in the face of wicked socio-ecological problems’
- Joint research applications
- Joint/comparative case studies
- Joint publications
- ...