

Third “Public pedagogy and sustainability challenges” international network meeting, Maynooth University, Ireland. 27-30/11, 2018.

The discussion so far, summary

This network brings together educational theorists, sustainability education researchers and researchers in the field of sustainability transition governance. They share a scientific interest in the relation between education and societal transformation and want to deepen and widen our understanding of the public role of education in the face of sustainability challenges through nourishing and facilitating interdisciplinary research collaboration. The aim of the network is to develop a theory of public pedagogy with a focus on sustainability challenges and address – both theoretically and empirically – questions such as: How can education play a democratic role in addressing sustainability challenges? What are vital conditions or obstacles to make this possible? What does this imply for designing sustainability education practices? What are the theoretical, methodological and empirical implications of researching sustainability education as public pedagogy?

During the kick-off symposium in March 2017, we took time to get to know and discuss each other’s work and to broadly explore the network’s topic. A variety of subjects have been discussed and interesting questions raised (see also [report](#)):

- Sustainability challenges can be characterised as *political* issues for which no clear-cut, uncontested solutions exist. When issues are not neutral, education cannot be reduced to transferring neutral knowledge either. Particular worldviews are always, automatically and necessarily connected to the knowledge content – as ‘companion meanings’.
- In the face of sustainability issues where stakes are high, values in dispute, facts uncertain and decisions urgent, there has been a plea for ‘post-normal science’. Do we also need something like ‘post-normal education’ then? And how to understand and design it?
- How can education question the status quo and challenge dominant, unsustainable systems? And is it actually possible not to think of and design education that is not system-challenging? Education can be seen as having a very radical potential: through education, all people can become morally and politically mature. As such, education makes democracy possible.
- Three ‘selective traditions’ of environmental and sustainability education have been identified, each of them holding a different view on the relation between education and democracy: a fact-based tradition (where democracy comes after education), a normative tradition (where democracy precedes education) and a pluralistic tradition (where democracy is situated within education).
- A related topic of discussion is the role and possibility of education in general in tackling societal challenges such as sustainability problems. We agreed that we should not be too idealistic regarding what education can ‘fix’ and that we need to avoid an all too instrumental and linear perspective on the relation between education and societal change. On the other hand, isn’t a perspective on change what makes a theory *pedagogical*? How to deal with the ever-present tension between openness for radical change and the search for order? And what is the role of (public) pedagogy in this?

- Another tension is that between radically democratic and pedagogic concerns on the one hand and a strong sense of urgency regarding sustainability concerns on the other. Can we take our time (to 'study' sustainability issues, for instance – see below) in times of urgency?
- Universities can be a very particular way to address societal challenges, that is, as a 'universitas studii': a gathering of people who study matters of concern. Rather than an understanding of the university as an institution this is a perspective of it as a movement or a pedagogical form. It is something that 'happens' – or not happens – and has to do with creating attentiveness.
- How can concrete practices (of solidarity, for instance) in the here and now become acts of public pedagogy? And is experiencing such practices in itself what makes them pedagogical? Or is it about creating occasions to make these experiences the object of study?
- Very diverse practices have been discussed: classroom discussions in schools, university courses, internet forum discussions, social movements, folk high schools, community projects, arts... Are all of these *pedagogical* practices? Or does the latter require a specific focus on studying something (unlike, for instance, arts and social movements)?

During the second network meeting in January 2018, we focused more systematically on further conceptualising our understanding of public pedagogy in the specific context of sustainability issues. We tried to identify and describe key concepts that can provide us with a shared vocabulary on the network's topic as well as important research challenges (see also [report](#) and [Slack workspace](#)).

Key concepts:

- The main challenge is how to relate 'public' to 'pedagogy' and to 'sustainability issues'.
- Public: What constitutes the public? Is it only the sum of humans or is it something more/something else? Should we talk/think about plural publics? What does it mean for something to be public? Is it inherently good? And what do we find on the other side of the spectrum? Is it for example the private? It has been argued that sustainability issues are good examples of issues of which one can say that 'we are all in this together'. The public, then becomes a multi-layered construct composed of many human and non-human elements and always specific in particular places.
- Pedagogy: When is public pedagogy 'pedagogy' and not – for instance, communication? Is there a form of pedagogy which is not public? How to take care of the pedagogical so that it does not slide away, e.g. in a discourse of 'learning'? Some have criticised the notion of learning as a mechanistic, individualised reduction of the pedagogical to an economic phenomenon that is never well-defined and taken for granted as an effortless activity in which nothing is at stake. (How) we can still use this contested concept? Other have argued that we should perhaps seek to reclaim it, acknowledging that purely 'good' or 'bad' concepts never exist and that learning can have a completely different meaning than the one criticised. In relation to sustainability issues, for instance, the appeal to learning can be seen to originate from the awareness that there are important things that we do not know (radically not know) and that therefore learning is important. This could create space for other than individualistic, mechanic and economic approaches to learning.

- Sustainability issues: How to deal with the profound effects of sustainability issues in public pedagogy? And with the tension between, on the one hand, the urgency of profound (radical) societal change required to tackle them and, on the other hand, the 'wickedness' (uncertainty, complexity, normativity...) of sustainability problems? How can education facilitate change without determining what this change should look like? And is *any* change defensible in the context of sustainability issues? Or should we firmly resist the promise underlying dominant discourses on education that it can/should solve problems?
- On the relation between pedagogy and sustainability it seems interesting to focus on the question what it is that should be sustained from a pedagogical point of view. Maybe we should sustain the school and the university as settings that are in themselves specific ways to take care of something. Sustaining that, is a way to create places where there is always care, in relation to renewal. It is a particular way of dealing with issues so that they make us think and study. Studying involves distance, but also always care, getting attached to something. In relation to the often voiced concern that education needs to take the concern for the urgency of sustainability challenges and their far reaching effects seriously, appeals to 'defend education' or 'sustain the school/university' should not be seen as a thread. On the contrary: it is precisely about protecting and sustaining a very particular way of approaching education that is radical in itself. That is the power of education that can actually be seen as something that can create a space for more radical perspectives on sustainability as well.
- It is important to look for concepts which are mediating factors between sustainability and public pedagogy. Normativity, re-politicising, activism, commitment, care, heterotopia, passions, engagement (putting oneself at stake), radicalness, disruption, plurality and dissensus are deemed to be such mediating factors which ought to be further conceptualised in this context. This relation is troublesome but this does not have to be problematic per se: over-clarification might be troublesome as well. We should keep it complex and 'stay with the troubles'.

Research challenges:

- There is a need for further conceptual clarification on the relationship between public pedagogy and sustainability issues, although it may be impossible to come to consensus. Both education and sustainability should not be treated as mere instruments or metaphors. Hence we have to really talk about these concepts one by one and try to understand and connect them, instead of just saying that they are important: What does the specificity of sustainability issues mean in relation to public pedagogy? We need to create a grammar and vocabulary to further develop these debates. In order to do so, it is very important to bring *content* into the discussion: concrete education practices, concrete sustainability issues. That is necessary in order to create opportunities for friction and surprises.
- There is a need for empirical research in view of further clarifying the key concepts in focus. Some have warned about the risk of falling into 'What works?'-approaches and quasi-experimental designs of empirical studies. Others, however, believe that the questions '*whether* something works' and '*how* it works' (or 'what work it does allow/enable') are fundamentally different ones. The latter, they argue, are very relevant to address empirically.

- There has been a plea for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research: Research *with* others rather than researching others.
- Several more specific research topics have been raised:
 - Focus not only on the intellectual aspect but also on aspects of emotion, body, sense etc.
 - Focus not only on the outcome but also on the process (opening the ‘blackbox’ of what happens in concrete practices)
 - Investigating what happens in practices that claim to be a case of public pedagogy might help to clarify these concepts more than just focussing on the concepts themselves. These are, after all, very difficult to grasp disconnected from a specific historical context and setting.
 - Pay attention to moments of disruption, to struggle, to questioning the routine ways of doing, to engagement and artistic ways of self-expression (in a Deweyan sense – expression of an emerging self) where becoming someone and making something are not disconnected from each other.
 - Investigate the function of (alternative) imaginaries for dealing with urgent sustainability issues in public pedagogy.
 - Further clarify the relation between self-transformation and societal transformation in practices of public pedagogy.
 - Focus on how new ways of acting in the world come into being, on ‘educative moments’, on ‘potentiality’ and ‘emancipation’.
 - Further clarify the interplay between preservation (care) and renewal (change, intervention) in practices of public pedagogy.
 - Clarify ethical grounds for linking public pedagogy and sustainability. What does it mean to work with these issues as a researcher? To be part of this network?
 - Focus on the issue of time (taking/arranging time to study, slowing down), the issue of place/space (making place to study) and the relation between time and place/space (giving time = making place).