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PLEASE JOIN US IN AN OPEN-SPACE REFLECTION
ON ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Rae André

Northeastern University

Sue Currey

St. Edward's University

Christina A. Hannah

University of Maryland University College

ABSTRACT

Please join us in a special space designed for reflection on environmental sustainability. Our premise is that commitment to sustainability comes from deep within each individual. In this space each person is welcome to speak about this earth, and about our attempts to preserve it. We offer this space for individual reflection, sharing, and listening, not discussion. In the last few minutes we will explore whether this experimental format might be adapted and applied to other subjects and in other contexts. *Doors will close five minutes after the session begins and participants should plan to stay for the entire session.*

Keywords:

Sustainability, mindfulness, emotion, nature of knowledge, knowledge-by-exemplification, pedagogy, experiential exercise, managing meaning, environment

INTRODUCTION

We create a one-hour time in a quiet space for reflection on environmental sustainability. In this time and space individuals speak as they are so moved about sustainability, without dialoguing with each other. Any mode of speech is welcome, from declarations to story telling to poetry to singing. During the last ten minutes a facilitator discusses what we have witnessed, what we learned, and what the facilitators anticipated might be learned from the session.

This session was inspired by an obviously deeply-felt comment made by Professor David Fearon at the PRME session of last year's OBTC, to the effect that an individual's commitment to sustainability has to be "felt," and by a subsequent discussion between an OBTC oldtimer and two newcomers in support of this belief. We think that moving on Fearon's idea might be worthwhile (but wish to be clear that he is not developing this presentation with us, and that any attributions, especially the negative, about it should be made solely to us). Although the session we propose is experimental, it is certainly within the spirit of this conference. We believe it will intrigue and perhaps empower its participants, and that it has the potential to influence the way we teach sustainability, and also other topics that have ethical content. The session extends the theory of knowledge-by-exemplification (Chia & Holt, 2008) into practice by providing time for individual insight and awareness to develop.

One of us remembers with great fondness a Quaker meeting attended some twenty years ago (the sole Quaker meeting this person has attended). In this meeting, individuals sat in concentric rows arranged in a large circle. Quaker meetings have no minister; rather individuals stand and

proclaim/describe/chant/read about what is in their hearts, for the benefit of the assembled congregation.

At that long-ago meeting, a man stood and described with affection the tree that had grown outside his window for years, and our co-presenter has never forgotten his affection for that tree and the aesthetic and moral contribution it made to that man's life. Perhaps the experiential connection had more impact on the observer than a typical lecture, and we educators should pay more attention to it.

One of us, too, suggests that:

- a) People in modern organizations have virtually no time for the behaviors that are the focus of this experiment (reflection, sharing, listening).
- b) This is a significant gap that contributes to stress and limits creative thinking and problem solving.
- c) There are no readily available models that might be adopted for this purpose.

And goes on to point out that:

Important criteria for a successful model for the presentation include:

- a) Limited investment of time.
- b) A tangible organizational purpose/goal.
- c) A simple methodology.
- d) A skilled "facilitator" who can sense and help people with discomfort.
- e) A room and procedure that assures quiet.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

This presentation supports the notion that approaches to and beliefs about knowledge in today's business schools fail to include insights, including emotional ones, about the contexts of business problems (Chia & Holt, 2008). As Chia & Holt (2008) write,

The implication is that this knowledge-by-exemplification is transmitted within the business school classroom, not so much through systematic analysis and representation of managerial situations, but through the inclinations, enthusiasm, and predispositions displayed by faculty members and the manner in which they exemplify their skill, care, concern and approach, or otherwise, in engaging with, dealing, and assessing an idea...(p.482).

In short, it may be that an appreciation for sustainability is best taught by those who display “animated conviction” (Chia & Holt, 2008: 473), rather than those who primarily analyze circumstances. Such a teaching approach incorporates the idea that a teacher’s heightened awareness, what some call “mindfulness,” (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006) may contribute meaningfully to student learning. One theoretical proposition is that effective teachers model “an acute sensitivity and awareness of however immersed in a given set of circumstance one finds oneself, one can still discover strategic advantage through alertness, resourcefulness, guile, and timely opportunism to frame and reframe problems, and hence, to effect favorable outcomes” (Chia & Holt, 2008: 482).

In the same vein, designing emotionally engaging and immersive experiences for students themselves may be an important contribution to sustainability courses. Dispositional mindfulness, which is defined as receptively attending to and being aware of ongoing internal states and behavior, has been shown to be related to happiness and ecologically responsible behavior (Brown & Kasser, 2005.) It has also been suggested that mindfulness may reduce consumerism (Rosenberg 2004).

SESSION DESCRIPTION

Our abstract (above) is our invitation to the community to join in this reflection:

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space each person is welcome to speak about this earth, and about our attempts to preserve it. We offer this space for individual reflection, sharing, and listening, not discussion. In the last few minutes we will explore whether this experimental format might be adapted and applied to other subjects and in other contexts. *Doors will close five minutes after the session begins and participants should plan to stay for the entire session.*

At the door we will hand out a page of guidelines for the session. Because of our own deeply-felt commitment to this issue, our plan is to make these lovely and evocative, as well as informative. We will suggest that individuals try to stay for the whole session rather than disrupt it by leaving.

The contents of the session are left up to the participants. Silence is ok. The presenters may speak if so moved, as participants.

In our debriefing we will point to Chia & Holt's proposed knowledge-as-exemplification approach to management education and describe how it differs from knowledge-by-representation. We will engage participants in a discussion about how to translate this session into something they could use in a class on sustainability.

APPLICATION TO CONFERENCE THEME AND SUB-THEME(S)

Where's the magic?

It's here!!! If this is not about the wonder of learning, we don't know what is. Not only is it about saving our beautiful planet, it's about how to engage in that effort with our full humanity.

And, if YOU come, it might well be really special!

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