



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy: Skills for a changing world
Editor:	(ed) Arran Stibbe
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“Joe Chemo” sits in a hospital bed, a drip attached to his arm. A small text box in the image reads, “The surgeon general warns that smoking is a frequent cause of wasted potential and fatal regret”. This image appears in a chapter entitled *Advertising Awareness: The ability to expose advertising discourses that undermine sustainability, and resist them*. This chapter, by editor Arran Stibbe, describes the problems inherent in advertising discourses in terms of sustainability (for example, the consequences of the “pseudo-satisfier” discourse perpetuating a model that encourages personally and socially unsustainable levels of consumption). Then it goes on to suggest a student activity, aware that learning-through-action is a key to embedding these kinds of ideas. Each chapter, to a greater or lesser degree, follows this pattern: a description of the author’s area of expertise in the field of sustainability studies, plus a learner exercise that can be used to enhance or establish the key understandings covered in the chapter. This kind of

fieldbook / workbook – handbook - approach is one of the keys to this book's success.

A handbook is supposed to be a reference or collection of instructions which can be readily consulted, and this is both, but not initially. One of the difficulties with sustainability is that its scope is both broad and deep: the book covers a field ranging from the need for embracing a Taoist approach in life and teaching, through permaculture and developments in technology, to carbon, consciousness, media and cultural literacies, by authors from the fields of engineering, art, permaculture, outdoor education, anthropology, literature, mathematics, business studies, climatology, ecology, and linguistics, ending with four chapters on education transformation for sustainability. It can certainly be used as a handbook, but it needs to be read and digested thoroughly first. Luckily this is a pleasant task. The selection of material, the layout of the chapters, and the sense of building a deep understanding through progression are tangible here.

The book is arranged in a very specific chapter order to facilitate its being read from cover to cover, providing a structured overview of many aspects of sustainability, and allowing any reader to build up a cohesive picture of the field. This kind of “Love Actually” approach, where the picture is built up of many smaller narratives which collectively illustrate what might otherwise appear to be a behemoth of a subject, is engaging and satisfying. Chapters are both grouped and progressively linked – for example, the first seven chapters broadly cover the attributes, dispositions, or ways of thinking which can be seen to underpin the later chapters on assessing the roles of different types of technology. These first chapters, rather than covering the environmental problems facing the earth (where most sustainability literature begins), understand that social, cultural and economic problems underlie the actions that lead to the environmental problems.

This clarity about the nature of where our actions are embedded and from where they arise is crucial for any real understanding of sustainability, and a strong element of this work. It also makes it a natural match for subjects like critical, cultural, and historical studies, though it is by no means necessarily confined to this area. Moreover, the chapters at the end of the book cover the changes that need to take place in educational institutions if we, as educators, are to fully integrate a sustainability literacy (in the sense of literacy as a *practice*, comprising both knowledge and the ability to act on that knowledge).

They challenge our current educational policy, which emphasises skills sets for employability rather than a more rounded and grounded approach to learning for a rapidly changing world.

The very fact that change is rapid in this century and perhaps particularly in this area is explicitly acknowledged by the fact that the book is supported by an online resource, a multi-media version of the book which includes additional chapters, video interviews, discussion groups and extra resources. The cohesion in the book may be at least partially explained or supported by the fact that the authors attended a series of workshops and symposia to encourage interaction and discussion before the book was compiled. This is one illustration of the level of deliberation and holism underlying each aspect of this book, which is exemplary. The fact that the book is both an information resource and a fund of practical ideas that, as it says, “can be applied to a wide range of educators, from parents to professors”, without trying to be rigid in its approach, shows an understanding of how learning is most effective.

Having said that, the most effective exercises are those which have been thoroughly tested in different learning situations, like the “web of connection” exercise in chapter 3, adapted from one used many times in the Transition Towns process; the materials awareness exercise in chapter 20, encouraging students to look deeper into materials to assess their hidden impacts; or the eco-criticism exercises in chapter 1 which had my students instantly engaged and receptive. Less successful are those which appear not to have been extensively trialled and perhaps exist only as thought experiments (these tend to start with a tentative, “perhaps students could...”). But the principle of active learning is sound and designed to produce the kinds of learning behaviour we, as educators, most value: self-reflection, self-directed enquiry, learning by doing, engagement with real-life issues, and learning within communities of practice.

There could be an issue with some readers about the very broad approach taken towards the field of sustainability. Some approaches may seem to some to be un-academic or countercultural in approach. As the introduction states, “There may well be parts that are contentious or refutable, but given the conditions of the world this was considered preferable to something that was so blandly abstract that it was beyond debate.” Rather than a weakness this holism is a real strength of the book. It is not that it has a “something for

everybody” feel; rather, it shows that we will all need to become more open to different voices, approaches, ways of doing things if we are to develop in ourselves and our students the resilience we will all need.

This book can function simultaneously as an introductory reader, as a sourcebook for further reading and research, as a kind of workbook or source of exercises for students, and as a structuring device when devising ways to teach sustainability. It is far-reaching and inclusive and will provide a multi-layered resource which could be used in many different teaching and learning situations.