Higher Education in Times of Climate Urgency, Polarization and Psychic Numbing - Navigating Bildung and Activism

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Arjen Wals
The Doughnut of social foundations and planetary boundaries (Raworth 2017)
“I’m sorry, Jeannie, your answer was correct, but Kevin shouted his incorrect answer over yours, so he gets the points.”
THE TECHNOLOGY THAT CONNECTS US ALSO CONTROLS US

THE DILEMMA

Never before have a handful of tech designers had such control over the way billions of us think, act, and live our lives.

WAGENINGEN UR
For quality of life

Norwegian University of Life Sciences
Environmental Melancholia

By listening more deeply and focusing on invitation, versus persuasion and fear-based appeals, we can build deeper coalitions and collaborations that cross political and ideological boundaries (Renee Lertzman, 2015)
DO SOMETHING, YOU BUNCH OF MANIACS!

WELL! IT'S EASY TO JUST CRITICIZE, YOUNG LADY...

...AND I SUPPOSE YOU'VE GOT AN ALTERNATIVE ALL WORKED OUT, HAVE YOU?

HYSTERICAL ECO-FANATICS! ALWAYS TELLING PEOPLE HOW TO LIVE...

GET YOURSELF A PROPER JOB!
What is education for? (modified after Biesta, 2012)
Sustainability Bildung

Values and Ethics
Boundary Crossing and Systems Thinking
Diversity and Dissonance
Change and Transitions
Agency and Transformative Capacity
Developing Transformative Skills

- **Openness**
  To meet situations, people, others’ and own thoughts and feelings with openness, presence and acceptance.

- **Perspective-seeking**
  To seek and bring in more perspectives for a larger understanding of myself, others and the whole.

- **Sense making**
  To see and understand the bigger and deeper patterns and my role in the world we create together.

- **Developing an inner compass**
  To navigate myself and the world with insight based on what is really important to me and have the courage and willingness to act on this.

- **Compassion**
  To see and meet myself and others with warmth, caring, humility and integrity.

Source: Tomas Björkman: Inner-societal transformation in practice
Urban Living Labs

A living lab way of working
Living-Labs for Sustainable Development (LL4SD)s are:

experimental, often temporary, “ecologies of learning” that engage multiple stakeholders in the co-creation, testing and evaluating of solutions to sustainability challenges in a real-world setting.
Sustainability is not just something to learn, it's something to live!

UNESCO, 2016 / GEM2016 Report
Using starting questions to reflect on a Whole System Approach to Sustainability
Arjen Wals, Sept. 2020

- What's important to us? What's asked from us? (qualities, values, content)
- How do we organize this? (management, leadership)
- How do we know we are succeeding? (monitoring & evaluation)
- How do we educate and learn? (pedagogy & didactics)
- How do we connect with ourselves, the community and the (non-human) world? (relationships, networks, partnerships)
Key Points

- We need to break the logic of efficiency, growth, innovation and accountability: it is killing the spaces for transition and the freedom to learn, dialogue and explore. Instead, it cultivates values of competitions, self-interest, instant rewards and short-term gain.

- A more radical response – no longer ‘add-on’ or even building-in – a whole system redesign is necessary that allows for a critical relational way of teaching, learning and investigating.

- Working with niches in universities (sit-spots, i-week, foodforests, but also Xtion rebellion, BLF-matter – critical groups rising – mindfulness, veganism, quest for meaning and justice, etc.) Students are self-organising – which is great – but where is the university in all this?

- A culture of fear and polarization needs to make way for a pedagogy of hope and concrete utopia’s that energize and inspire.
Key Questions

- How can systemic and transitional forms of education for sustainability best be designed, organised, supported and evaluated?
- How can universities and the key actors within them, become more relational? (connecting to place, people, other species and matter) What does a more relational pedagogy entail/require?
- How can ICT and ‘small data’ support learners in investigating sustainability issues (role of ‘civic science’)?
- How can universities connect with transition niches and vice versa?
Questions...?

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Source: Banksy