

# walkingthetalk

British Columbia Working Group and Network on Sustainability Education

November 30, 2006

Campus 2020  
PO Box 9133 Stn Prov Govt  
Victoria, BC  
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To Geoff Plant and Campus 2020;

The BC Working Group on Sustainability Education and the walkingthetalk network were formed in early 2006 in response to the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development through an opportunity created by Learning for a Sustainable Future with additional funding provided by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education.

The BC Sustainability Education Working Group has been established to advance the agenda of sustainability education in the province. The group of approximately 20 decision makers and leaders in sustainability education are working together with sector teams to forward three specific interest areas (non-formal education, K-12 education, and post-secondary education). The vision of the BC Working Group is to create leadership and support for sustainability education across the province.

## What is sustainability? What is sustainability education?

**Sustainability** is a concept, a goal, and a strategy. The concept speaks to the reconciliation of social justice, ecological integrity and the well being of all living systems on the planet. The goal is to create an ecologically and socially just world within the means of nature without compromising future generations. Sustainability also refers to the process or strategy of moving towards a sustainable future.

**Sustainability education:** Education that concentrates on the concept of sustainability (see above) in a manner that fits with the values of sustainability. What we teach, what we don't teach and how we teach are all considered when creating sustainability education practices. Sustainability education is interdisciplinary, collaborative, experiential and potentially transformative. Sustainability education is also a process of creating a space for inquiry, dialogue, reflection and action about the concept and goals of sustainability.

Definitions from Moore (2004)

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## Connections to Campus 2020

The following document contains ideas, comments and visions for the future of higher education in BC from members of the BC working group and the walkingthetalk network. We hope you take the time to consider these comments for the Campus 2020 consultation and final report.

“Change is afoot in our communities, our landscapes, and around the world that normal science and the traditional disciplinary domains of our universities are not fit to address. These disturbing changes in our weather patterns, our climate system, our patterns of health and disease, habitats and systems the world over -- are the principle result of perhaps a hundred years of unsustainable use of our resources, organization of our human environment, social and institutional structures, and economies. These changes are undeniable and severe, the challenges to which they put current and future generations of scholars and change agents are unprecedented, and the capacity of our key institutions of higher learning in British Columbia to prepare us are sorely inadequate. BC’s universities and colleges are in an excellent position to accept the responsibility of a new scale of response to the research, educational and service demands of sustainable development. Yet we are not accepting this responsibility.

In failing to support the scaling up of research, curriculum development, and service-based activities toward the advancement of sustainable development, British Columbia’s higher education system is losing some of the brightest minds in the pursuit of this transition and failing to attract the students who will be the future of this work, in fields that span the curriculum from commerce to microbiology to music. These minds and the capital and capacity they represent are being lost to institutions in regions where governments, research institutions, and others are coming together to build a common front of commitment to make necessary changes and investments toward new ways of organizing our world regions in Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, even Arizona. In failing to take the opportunity of creating a BC-wide strategy for the integration of sustainable development into our curricula, our research programs, and our service agenda in our higher education institutions, in losing these people, these minds, these ideas, we risk also losing hope in our province’s long-term future.

I urge Campus 2020 to investigate what leading world regions and higher learning institutions are doing to rearrange their systems of education, research, and community-university engagement in order to address the fundamental human challenge of sustainable development. In further investigating the potential of a focus on sustainable development to a long-term plan for higher education in BC, I have full confidence that this global concept and framework will emerge as a most hopeful and most worthy investment of the future work of our united intellectual energies province-wide. With the foresight to take responsibility for the changes we see and harness our province’s immense natural and human resources toward the transition that we need to envision, define and implement, we can lead the world.”

Dr. Meg Holden  
Assistant Professor, Urban Studies and Geography  
Simon Fraser University

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“Our educational institutions have encountered significant challenges acknowledging, through operations and curriculum, that we and our students are citizens in a rapidly diminishing ecosphere; that everything we imagine, study, and create is made possible by something that we are destroying partly by omission, and partly by habit and negligence. Understanding this is relatively straight-forward: Our urban behaviour, our institutions and our industrial systems work according to principles that were designed for the industrial *revolution*, a time characterized by unlimited natural resources and *limited* human resources. But in our time conditions present a profound reversal; we have limited natural resources and more people than ever, yet we are using the same modes of thought and action invented by the industrial revolution over 500 years ago.

Educational systems contribute greatly to this; the collective impact of most current curriculum and policies of higher learning amounts to something John Ralston Saul describes as *the defacto promise of increased destruction* by feeding the voracious appetites of production and consumption. It is illusory to think, Bill Rees reminds us, that energy efficiency; recycled content, hybrid technology or riding a bike contributes in any real way to the sustainability of the ecosphere. With ecosphere destruction growing by 3% per year, technologies and buying habits that simply attempt to *reduce* damage do nothing to create sustainability, not to mention accelerate it. In B.C. in general, and Vancouver in particular this illusion is magnified by our tendency to confuse *livability* with *sustainability*. They are rarely the same.

We live in a world that’s imagined by humans, but the sum of this imagination manifests itself largely as an unquestioned reliance on activities that continue to contribute to the ongoing decline of all living and social systems. We know that the ecological crisis has become, over the past 15 years, an established fact, and we know that our wealthy lifestyles play increasingly important roles in every aspect of environmental degradation. Our lifetimes will see the end of cheap oil, and we’ll see the real meaning of climate change. Over the next 11 years China will build a housing stock equivalent to two Americas – 400 million houses. Consumer debt is at its all time high, and it seems *all* of our activities feed consumption in some way, yet this philosophy of consumerism is being challenged by events at increasingly large and far-reaching scales. *What is education for?* Is it enough that an education institution simply replicates the conditions that have created these conditions, or can it be an adaptive learning organization addressing vital issues that have come to characterize our time?

It’s common to think of learning as good in itself but many of the things we learn, and much of what educational institutions model, help us create systems that unknowingly feed a kind of monster (Orr 1991). That monster is a complex globalized system of production and consumption that provides our comfortable lives, but has significant hidden aspects and unintended consequences.

Education in itself – higher learning - gives us access to choice, comfort, wealth and power. It provides opportunities for improved standards of living and access to an economic system, but it never guarantees that we’ll do the right thing - Elie Wiesel makes the point that the holocaust was

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designed by some of the most educated men in all of Europe (Orr 1991). It is arguable that the profound and pervasive destructive capacity of our current industrial model is susceptible to the same charge. We peddle *access to education* with a kind of missionary zeal that may, in its present form unintentionally create an intractable web that exerts the exact opposite force to that of sustainability. In fact some of the most sustainable human settlements on earth were *and are* those with the least access to education as we define it. How might our education systems wrestle with the possibility that those of us who have access to higher education are more likely to be in the position of creating damage, and managing systems that create the damage?"

Duane Elverum  
Emily Carr Institute

"Teaching must begin with a commitment to facilitation of learning based on discovery, critical thinking and connection to one's own life and community. Facilitation is from the French word *facile*, *easy*, and it is a facilitator's job to make it easy for others to participate and to partake in the processes of teaching and learning. In planning for post-secondary education in 2020, the one thing we can be sure of is change. Our teaching strategies must therefore facilitate inclusive, integrative, adaptive, flexible and proactive learning. The global concept of sustainability can thus be understood more as a process than an outcome, as a strategy and not simply an end goal. In this vein, the information age may transition to the age of knowledge; our outdated and incomplete economic systems may give way to more truthful ecological economics; and our infatuation with technology may be tempered by an understanding of such mechanisms as tools that can advance and not dictate our educational environments.

Beyond sharing the basic necessity of all biological organisms for water, food and shelter, humans need nourishment of a different kind to thrive. Our collective successes may therefore emerge from newer models of cooperation and not solely competition. Our collective futures may be situated within the global community, but our perspectives must remain embedded in and committed to our local neighbourhoods and communities. Through these strategies, the facilitation of education can be made easy(er). The future is already here. What are we waiting for?"

Yona Sipos

Graduate Academic Assistant, UBC Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth  
PhD Student, Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia

"If we believe that sustainability demands vertical integration among higher education and other sectors in society (NGO's, Governmental ministries and corporations) then we have to consider how the current and different functions of the university can work together to achieve what those other sectors would need for society to work collaboratively towards greater sustainability.

I would call what is needed a "for profit" quasi-NGO. The for-profit refers to incentives for people and it means that the university rewards its employees for working out ways to effectively work with other sectors. Quasi-NGO means that the university acts as an NGO with a strong mandate for

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creating courses and research programs that address real world problems. Combining the course, research and service functions can be relatively easy if the appropriate incentives are in place. Faculty, for example, do not want to constantly re-create or invent courses because this is not rewarding enough (i.e., no credit for doing so).

What if....

1. There were shares available in the universities and colleges?
2. Faculty were given shares as part of pay?
3. Decisions on real world problems were incorporated into strategic plans for university?
4. These were addressed by teams of transdisciplinary instructors?
5. Evaluation was based on criteria associated with addressing problems was the source of more shares in corporation?

This is the beginning of an idea. I am proposing investment and rewards as an organizing device for providing incentives for faculty and by extension – students - to address sustainability issues. Faculty must be the engines here and *there is currently no reason, aside from moral compulsions, to do so.*

If there is no change in the internal functions of the university (i.e., it does not commit itself to sustainability) then I believe the future is one of distance learning, land development and the creation of learning communities (condos and interest classes for the retirees who buy them). Sports teams will be gone from campus (too expensive), undergraduates will have courses via the internet and graduate programs will dominate by having close ties to corporations that fund them."

Rob VanWynsberghe  
Lecturer  
University of British Columbia

"Sustainability education needs to be a cross-curricular initiative. A subject like gender studies has blossomed in the last 25 years as a paradigm through which to view all subject areas; sustainability education could definitely attract students as a similar faculty. This would promote inter-faculty communication and cooperation under one common umbrella. The teachers in this faculty would be leaders in looking at all subject areas through a sustainable lens, and could then also motivate instructors in their "home" faculty to look at their subject area in a new way. Graduates of the faculty would have a broad idea of environmental literature, an environmental assessment of history, environmental ethics, nature-based science, true-value economics, etc...Students also ought to be required to do a co-op in the community and look at how their

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workplace does or does not reflect sustainable initiatives, and then faculty and students, as experts, would design programs to improve that workplace's footprint and ethic. Faculty would also work with municipal, provincial and federal governments, and NGOs to disseminate and activate theoretical initiatives."

Selina Metcalfe, EEPsA executive

Surrey School District (Secondary English teacher)

And finally Heather Scholefield from the UBC Sustainability Office has compiled a number of actionable items and ideas for moving forward:

- David Orr states that the present juncture of the world was largely the result of people with BAs, BSs, LLBs, MBAs, and PhDs. Universities train leaders, develop technologies, and have largely created and perpetuated a solely economic basis of measurement. Therefore universities are uniquely positioned to steer us to a more sustainable direction
- All efforts should be multi-pronged: universities should integrate sustainability into the curriculum, research sustainable options and ideas, and operate on a sustainable basis (walk their talk)
- The largest impact universities have on a society is what their graduates do afterwards. A study in Spain looking at the ecological impact its architectural school had on the environment (looked at energy consumption, commuting, professional activity of staff) concluded that the graduates in their life AFTER university accounted for 99% of the impacts...the years they lived after and made choices about the size of their home, how to commute to work, and how they designed buildings (it's an architectural school)
- In teaching some important themes for ALL students to understand would be: basic principles of ecology, carrying capacity (ecological footprinting), appropriate scale, sustainable agriculture and forestry, environmental and social ethics, triple bottom line accounting, life cycle analysis, resource equity (worldwide and across generations)
- University research priorities should reflect public issues...health and environment
- Operations, should enable campuses to try out new ideas, enable some avenue for risk-taking. Campuses are small (and some cases large) communities in themselves. Try out car-free alternatives, alternative energy sources, new technologies. Province needs to back them up on assuming some of the risk associated with new ideas. Province will benefit most from the successes.
- Province should be evaluating and rewarding its universities for social and ecological successes (best employer, quality of student life, climate neutral, zero waste), as well as economic indicators (patents issued, enrollment, balanced budget)

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As a final thought I have included an interview excerpt with Dr. William Rees co-author of Our Ecological Footprint –a concept created in BC and utilized by countries and organizations around the globe.

“You see, in my mind 'better' people would be people who were not so much interested in maximizing their income but in maximizing their contribution to the sustainability capacity of their communities. We want citizens who are not better in a global competitive mode, but better in terms of how they can create a world that invests in its social capital. Today we are creating people who are consumed with the desire to consume physical capital. Think of unsustainability - one of its major root causes is excess energy and material flux through the ecosphere and most of that can be traced to the 'wealthiest' countries, which are the best educated countries.

A number of scholars have made the argument that it is the nature of higher education in the west that is at root cause of global unsustainability. We are turning out people whose primary interest in getting educated is NOT to become better human beings, NOT to contribute to the welfare of their fellows, but instead to accumulate stuff. We have sanctified greed, we've made selfishness and self-interest a legitimate way of being. In short we train people mainly to maximize their income- earning potential and therefore their propensity to consume, all of which contributes to the problem.”

We are looking forward to the Campus 2020 report and the ongoing dialogue of the role of higher education in creating a more sustainable future.

Sincerely;

Janet Moore

On behalf of the walkingthetalk network (see [www.walkingthetalk.bc.ca](http://www.walkingthetalk.bc.ca) for full details on group membership)

## Literature Cited

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