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# The Role of English Literature or Subject in Education for Sustainability

Rakhi Tyagi

Dept. of English (NET) H.No. 10, Type II – A MDU Campus, Rohtak (HR.)

## Abstract:

*Societies universal are facing various challenges which are shaping prospects for quality of life in the future. As David Orr reminds us, our educational systems have contributed to these untenable scenarios. Education for sustainability (Efs) seeks to address this through educational change and Higher Education has a particular responsibility and role to play, by equipping learners with the capabilities they need to take on these challenges. Education for Sustainability (Efs) spans all levels of formal, informal, professional and community education, using learning and change processes to help people critique and shape the decisions and social practices that influence our future as a global community. There are numerous HE agencies and institutions have signed up to this international movement and committed to advancement its aims. It is ambitious in scope, as it is not simply about including new information or issues within the content of what is taught, in order that people study 'about sustainability'. It focuses instead on how we 'do' education: how we respond to sustainability imperatives by rethinking our techniques, revising our courses, recasting our priorities and reorienting our communities of practice. Prominent sustainability rankings and awards, for example Universities that Count and the People and Planet Green League, ever more reward innovation underpinned by these strategic aims.*

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**History:** Educational innovation for sustainable development has been seen the same as necessary since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. At the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg, councils of both northern and southern countries restated the critical significance of education and learning to advance sustainable development goals. Education for sustainability (EFS) gained momentum through the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) promoted via UNESCO. With the impetus from these global, political and economic forums, numerous regional and governmental initiatives have accelerated since 2005 to support learning for sustainability at all educational levels.

**Introduction:** There has, quite rightly, been some suspicion about the current high main concern that Education for Sustainability has assumed within higher education, and a number of questions about the relevance of English subjects. Peter Knight, Vice Chancellor of the University of Central England, wrote in The Guardian that: 'It is not the job of universities to support a exacting political orthodoxy; it is their role to educate students to examine seriously policies, ideas, concepts and systems, then to make up their own minds. On the other hand, the literature on Education for Sustainability holds up exactly the ideal that Knight explains. The skills that students gain to become 'sustainability literate' are precisely the ability to critically examine policies, ideas, concepts and systems, and reflect on values in order to

make up their own minds about the role they will take in society in the future. As an example, *Engaging People in Sustainability* contains chapters on ‘Critical Thinking and Reflection’, ‘Systemic Thinking’ and ‘Imagining a Better Future’, but leaves it up to students to make a decision what that future is, and to discover paths for arriving there.

What Education for Sustainability additionally requires, though, is that systems are not examined as if they existed in isolation, however examined in the context of the other systems they relate to and have an impact on. With no understanding the interdependence and interconnection of religious, economic, social, cultural and biological systems, students will find it hard to live their lives or perform leadership roles in ways which contribute to a additional sustainable society.

Deliberations of what, exactly, ‘sustainability’ is, are over and over again marred by one sentence definitions which cannot possibly encompass the range of environmental, social and economic concerns that the world is presently facing. This article starts with a brief characterization of sustainability in terms of energy descent and social adaptation, but there are a lot of other ways to characterize it. Without a doubt, Education for Sustainability necessarily involves students in clarifying the concept for themselves in light of their evolving understanding of the interconnection of systems, their ongoing clarification of values and the emerging methodical confirmation.

For English subjects, Education for Sustainability requires an understanding of the role that language and literature take part in the construction of social, economic, cultural and religious systems, and the impact of these systems on the larger systems which support

life. The outcome is sustainability literacy, which leading sustainability educator Stephen Sterling describes as ‘the ability to understand and influence society. He means this figuratively, but reading is one of the primary ways that we understand the society around us, and writing is one of the primary ways that we influence that society. English subjects, consequently, have a key role to play in Education for Sustainability. This article gives one perspective on what Education for Sustainability engrosses, before explaining the essential role that English subjects can play, and are already playing, within it.

**Education for Sustainability:** Education for Sustainability is not about handing down technical information about the environment or encouraging students to recycle or buy a hybrid car. In its place, it actively involves students in a fundamental reconsideration of the way in which society is heading, given increasing awareness of the embeddedness and dependence of society on natural systems, and the current state of those systems. One way of thinking about the present situation is as a turning point in history, a transition between an ‘energy ascent era’ and an ‘energy descent era’.

For the Period of energy ascent, fossil fuels were used in exponentially increasing amounts to make an enormous surge in consumer goods, transportation and food production in industrialized countries, with a corresponding rapid increase in population, greenhouse gas concentrations and ecosystem degradation. In the rush for economic growth, little attention was paid to natural limits, or even to whether the forms of growth that occurred actually increased people’s well-being. At the peak of the ascent epoch there was intense pressure on universities to equip students with the skills necessary for the UK to increase its prosperity in a globally

competitive world. The influential Dearing Report, for instance, included statements for instance competitive advantage for advanced economies will lie in the quality, effectiveness and relevance of their provision for education and training, but failed to consider the impact of ‘competitive’ economies on the environment or on the long-term sustainability of society.

At this instant, we have the ultimate imperative to enter an ‘energy descent era’. If not, then the imminent peaking of oil production, combined with population growth, expanding resource requirements from developing countries, the impact of climate change and ecosystem degradation will make it increasingly difficult, and ultimately impossible, to meet basic requirements of the world population. The consequences for other species would also be severe, with a wave of extinction predicted on a scale not seen since the dinosaurs were wiped out. The changes necessary for sustainability are too large to be achieved only through alternative energy sources, rising technological efficiency, recycling, or other ‘fixes’ which have minimal impact on ways of life. Nothing can ‘fix’ or ameliorate an exponentially increasing consumption of resources and production of waste within a finite planet. Instead, widespread social and cultural change is both necessary and inevitable, either to rapidly change the direction that societies are heading, or at least to adapt to a very different, and less hospitable, world if that direction cannot be changed.

Nothing like the energy ascent epoch, though, there is still potential for energy descent to be handled in ways which take into consideration both the limits of natural systems and people’s well-being. It is still possible for energy descent to be accompanied by social and cultural ascent as some of the unintended disadvantages of over-consumption (manufactured desires,

dissatisfaction, obesity, debt, stress, traffic, alienation etc) are condensed, and positive low-consumption alternatives embraced (meaningful connection with other people, community celebrations, physical exercise, cultural pursuits, engagement in and re-enchantment with the natural world, etc. In other words, sustainability is about those who have their basic needs met working towards being more rather than having more, so that all can meet their basic needs and the ecosystems which support all forms of life can flourish.

There are, certainly, numerous other ways that ‘sustainability’ could be characterized, but no matter what the priorities and the path to be taken, it is the present students who will be leading the world into the energy tumble epoch and living with the consequences. There is now strong pressure on universities to help students prepare for new and emerging realities. The pressure comes from the United Nations via the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, the UK Government in the Securing the Future plan, and both the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Learning and Skills Council via their sustainability strategies. HEFCE states: ‘Our vision is that, within the next 10 years, the higher education sector in England will be recognized as a most important contributor to society’s efforts to achieve sustainability. While external pressure can be threatening, the new priority placed on human society, culture and values gives humanities subjects an important role in 21st-century education.

The learning of English language can help students to understand how grammatical, phonological, semantic and pragmatic features of language can combine together to form a wide range of discourses. These discourses model and construct social reality in exacting

ways, and hence influence how people behave and how they treat the world they live in. By importantly examining discursive constructions, such as those of progress, consumerism, scientism, success, development, convenience, free trade and economic growth, students can gain insight into the forces which have built and reproduce an unsustainable society.

Students examine texts for instance these in the context of the larger discourses they draw from, and the models of the world that these discourses perpetuate. The aim is for students to increase skills in exposing discourses which act against their interests and the interests of what they value in the world, and increase skills in resisting those discourses if they so wish. Resistance could be at a personal level (e.g. resisting the widespread model that over-consumption leads to happiness by consuming less), at a corporate level (e.g. resisting narrow discursive constructions of the 'bottom line' and raising questions about the ultimate ends a company is serving) or at a political level (e.g. resisting discursive constructions of the economy which represent increases in GDP as positive, no matter what their source). Whatever forms of resistance students decide to follow, English language provides the analytical and rhetorical skills necessary to argue beyond the level of the truth or falsity of isolated propositions, to a deeper critique of the models of the world which underlie particular forms of discourse. Serious Discourse Analysis and Rhetoric are already a standard part of the English language curriculum, and Education for Sustainability simply extends the coverage of sexism, racism, homophobia and other human-only concerns to consider the impact of social systems on the larger systems which support life.

Sustainability literacy cannot, on the other hand, be simply a matter of objectively sorting discourses into the two categories of 'contributes to a sustainable society' or 'contributes to the demise of humanity'. For one thing, discourses are relative.

E F Schumacher, for instance, established a discourse based on the model of 'Small is Beautiful', because the discourse of 'Big is better' was over-dominant in society, not because of an intrinsic superiority of the small. Also, in a complex world, any fixed, objective, algorithm for categorizing discourses would be partial and contestable, and attempts to impose criteria for dismissing certain forms of discourse could be interpreted as spreading political dogma.

Hence, it is necessary for students to construct their own continuously evolving framework, updated in response to what they discover through texts, direct experience of social and ecological systems, values clarification and emerging evidence. It is this framework which provides students with a means of evaluating discourses in terms of their potential to contribute to sustainability. It can never be a 'perfect' framework, but students essentially conduct analysis within academic frameworks, and Education for Sustainability simply needs that the frameworks take into consideration the ecological systems that humans exist within.

As well as discourse analysis, there is one more way that English language can contribute to Education for Sustainability. Unlike many subjects, English language gives consideration not only to written academic English but to a wide diversity of forms of English, including oral English, informal English and regional varieties. This is important because, as sustainability educator Chet Bowers points out,

many existing social practices within local community's link people and place in ways which contribute to sustainability. Examples include social activities based around family and friends, community interaction, appreciation of local nature, crafts, sharing of resources/labor among neighbors and local cultural events and celebrations. These practices are communicated orally and informally, and passed on from generation to generation through languages and varieties of language local to the bioregion. On the other hand, there is a tendency within education for specific local knowledge of this sort to be devalued in favor of the abstract, the global, the technical and the academic. While global/scientific knowledge is necessary in realizing the scale of the problems that humanity is facing, changing the direction of society requires action at all levels, including the specific, local and concrete level. English language, then, provides a chance to celebrate morality and dialectal variation, helping students to recognize that insights into sustainability can come from geographically rooted oral sources in addition to written, centralized, science-based sources.

**English literature :** English literature has a key role to play in Sustainability Literacy. Books are, after all, an main source of discourses which have an actual or potential impact on the sustainability of society, from technology-glorifying science fiction novels to nature writing so powerful that it helps readers to regain their lost enchantment with the natural world. On one hand, the historical dimension of literature helps students to understand from where some of the key discourses which have led societies along an unsustainable path have developed.

On the other hand, within the vast range of literature there is a wealth of diverse discourses

to be explored. Some of these discourses could contribute to reinventing social reality and reorienting society towards a sustainable future.

The potential of books to contribute to more sustainable ways of being is central to the rapidly evolving area of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism started out as a form of literary criticism with an environmentalist agenda, focused mainly on British and North American romanticism and nature writing. How students approach nature writing, and the criteria they use to criticize it, depends on their own evolving ecological framework. Students could, for example, critically appraise nature writing on the power it has to help its readers

Underlying all of these potential criteria is the question of how much power nature writing has to encourage readers to look beyond words and books and to interact directly with the natural world. As Gilbert White wrote, 'If I should have induced any of my readers to pay a more ready attention to the wonders of creation too readily overlooked as common occurrences ... then my purpose will be fully answered. Conversely, students can also look for factors which might be counterproductive to encouraging more sustainable relationships with the natural world, for instance piety, elitism, scientific inaccuracy, shallowness or tediousness.

The present trajectory of ecocriticism is towards a broader focus, including texts for instance science fiction, science writing, and cyborg writing, in addition to other types of cultural artifact for example films, television programmes, zoos, or paintings.

Denigration of nature writing alone, but, is not enough if the agenda is an environmentalist one. Many of the discourses which have a negative impact on the environment have no explicit

consideration or mention of natural systems at all, which is why they are so potentially destructive. For example, books and other cultural forms which promote lavish and extravagant lifestyles, reliance on inappropriate technology or absorption in the human-only world are just as important to criticize from a sustainability perspective as those which encourage communion with nature. Actually, the current trajectory of ecocriticism is towards a broader focus, including texts such as science fiction, science writing and cyborg writing in addition to other types of cultural artifact for example films, television programmes, zoos, or paintings. Criticism of books and other cultural artifacts which promote unsustainable social practices is essential because it provides a dark background against which alternatives can shine out and be discovered.

At what time students do discover alternative discursive models within literature which could help society to move towards sustainability, several paths open up for putting these models into practice. One way is for students to apply the models directly to their own lives, for example reflecting on the different quality of experience gained in watching TV or going shopping to time spent talking with friends or interacting closely with nature. There is one more way is promotion of the books themselves, as essential reading to prepare for life in the changing world of the 21st century. A third way, and a very important one, is for students to creatively weave aspects of the discourses they discover, and the models of the world that lie behind them, into their own speaking and writing.

**Conclusion:** The term ‘sustainability literacy’ is in common use in Education for sustainability (EfS) and at policy level. It signals the aim of helping people to develop their knowledge and

capacity to engage effectively with sustainability challenges. Different agencies and educators have listed their preferred pedagogies and competencies associated with becoming ‘sustainability literate’. There is much similarity amongst them and substantial overlap with the transferable skills and graduate attributes seen as quintessential for study. Our Education for sustainability (EfS) work sees the core educational value of sustainability as a stimulus for questioning social priorities, structures and change. To sidestep the trap of ‘paralysis by analysis’, our approach supports the ethos of critical reflective thinking in HE and provides a basis for engaging with alternative scenarios to those that currently face us. This means that our EfS strategies are geared towards the development of: students who are capable of envisioning, alternative futures, techniques for working collectively towards, positive and democratic change, participatory engagement to explore, shared and divergent interests and needs, challenges to the mindsets and priorities that drive unsustainable development, graduates who understand their professional responsibilities in this area.

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