



Engaging Multicultural Audiences in Sustainability Education

The crux of sustainability aims to be trans-disciplinary. A critical aspect of reproducing the fruits of sustainability initiatives is engaging diverse members of the social construct. As the international community is approaching Rio 2012, it is pivotal to reflect on education and outreach in a global context. Students play a key role in the sustainability paradigm as the recipients of its educational programs as well as the future professionals in this field. Members of the roundtable include the director and a selection of the students involved in the Youth Encounter on Sustainability (YES) program in Switzerland. Participants representing diverse cultures, academic disciplines, and sectors of sustainability reflect on how we can sustain the momentum in education.

Viniece Jennings: Thank you all for joining this roundtable and I look forward to receiving your perspectives on sustainability education from a cross-cultural perspective. Dr. Baud, as the founder of the Youth Encounter on Sustainability (YES) course, what were the benefits you envisioned from learning about sustainability from a cross-cultural perspective?

Roger Baud: The multicultural aspect is a very important point to sustainability because many issues pertaining to sustainability are global. If you think of global warming, resource depletion, the economy, communication methods, and so on, we have to think about them on a global scale.

With this being said, it is important that when we do a course on sustainability that it is culturally diverse so that we can learn from each other.

Viniece Jennings: Indeed. Ahmed, what are your thoughts in terms of some of the values that we can embrace to promote a global consciousness about sustainability?

Ahmed Mabrouk: Well, it is a global issue. Since it's not just a single country's issue, there should be an increase in worldwide projects and more looking to developing countries. For example, after the course I immediately went right to Egypt and noticed that a number of people did not know the meaning of the term sustainability. So I believe there should be more cooperation and more awareness, a more global view.

Roger Baud: For me, cultural diversity is as important as biodiversity, and I do not see a sustainable future in the sense that we become a uniform world. Unfortunately, we seem to be going in this direction at the moment. We should learn about other cultures, but not by convincing them to follow our cultural practices. It should really be a learning experience, and to see that some problems are similar, but many others are different.

If I look into a culture in a developing country, their environmental situation may be much different from a country like the United States or Switzerland. We should meet people where they are and accept that their solutions may be where their culture stands. During sessions in the YES course, it is important that we discuss the issue of globalization and not just in the sense of doing a kind of uniform application of rules and laws that everybody has to follow around the globe.

Viniece Jennings: That is a really good point, particularly when our class had over 20 countries represented. Our class discussions exposed different ways to think about similar problems. It is important to evaluate our motives if challenges arise. I believe that people will help sustain what they help create, so having those different perspectives and genuinely listening is a very good point.

To segue into another point, what would you say are the roles of instructors and professional development? In a diverse environment, what do you think instructors need to teach their students? I would start off with the need for holistic thinking and systems thinking. But I want to get your perspective on that as well.

Participants

Moderator

Viniece Jennings
Alumni, YES program
Fellow, Environmental Leadership Program
Doctoral candidate, *Florida A&M University*
United States

Roger Baud, Ph.D.

Director, YES program
Activating Talent in Sustainability (ACTIS)
Switzerland

Jaya Mahat

Alumni, YES program
Climate Himalaya Initiative
Social work background
Nepal

Laila Demashqieh

Alumni, YES program
Creative consultant, art education
Jordan

David Otieno

Alumni, YES program, CARDNO/KBDS
Founder, Dirt Solutions
Kenya

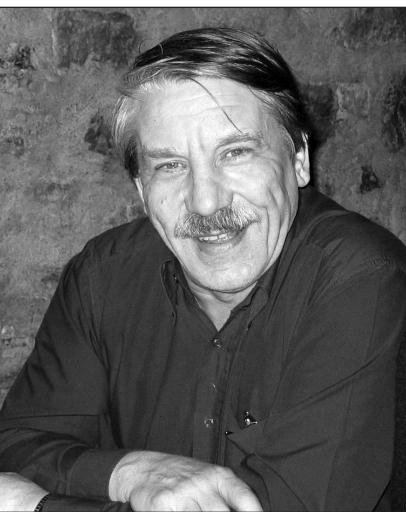
Ahmed Mabrouk

Alumni, YES program
Initiated Green Maadi
Doctoral student, *Queens University*
Egypt



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— Jaya Mahat



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— Roger Baud

Jaya Mahat: That is a good point; professional development should infiltrate every stage of the educational system so that instructors have the basic skills in how to facilitate diverse groups of students. We should now focus on potential roles that instructors play and how those roles should be involved in the conversation.

Laila Demashqieh: I think building awareness and working on the social and the psychological aspect is important as well.

Roger Baud: That is an excellent point, Laila. I think that our educational system, especially in the Western world, should change dramatically. Our current system is purely directed to cognitive thinking, knowledge creation, and so on. You know, already when kids are six years old they should learn three, four languages. They are trained in mathematics, and then of course for economics, and so forth. That is all about knowledge, no? They do not learn any more on the emotional level, values, ethics, and understand their role in how a society functions.

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David Otieno: We should also look at sustainability education from all perspectives. I think that churches and the faith-based community have a unique role in terms of informal sectors of learning. This would be a pivotal avenue since the church has considerable influence, and sustainability can be another topic that is discussed at its gatherings.

Viniece Jennings: That is a good point; does anyone else have comments in terms of faith-based communities?

Roger Baud: I think that David is completely right. Religion is something which actually transports these kinds of values that I would like to see—and it doesn't matter so much what type of religion. I think that is a good point.

Viniece Jennings: On the other hand, I also think that the course was tactful in making sure that various types of people had the opportunity to be involved. Depending on your country, everybody may not have access to quality education, so have you reached low-income and disadvantaged communities?

Laila Demashqieh: I think building awareness and working on the social aspect is particularly important with underprivileged areas. In my experience with refugee camps, the poor areas have no general knowledge on sustainability and the environment. For example, throwing waste into garbage bins can

actually be a foreign idea. There should be workshops in schools on basic environmental education that should be a part of the syllabus in our curriculum.

Ahmed Mabrouk: That can be challenging among impoverished communities and countries, especially when people cannot afford the basic needs of life. One's approach has to be relevant to their living conditions.

Roger Baud: That's true. I also agree with Laila's point in which we need workshops that discuss local and regional realities. I would say starting with the idea of global warming is the wrong approach. You have to start with the local conditions and local problems; then branch out to global issues. Education starts with what one initially sees and experiences. Several pedagogic strategies use this approach to teach values.

Laila Demashqieh: Our education is not considered something core or fundamental. When I taught (refugees) how to use art as a means of education, I used creativity to educate about waste management and sustainability. Consider how the marketing world uses the energy of colors and visual techniques to communicate to its audience ... the same can be applied to sustainability issues. Art made the refugees feel that they were expressing themselves and I learned something new about how to bridge the underprivileged and education.

Jaya Mahat: All students will feel their agenda is being addressed when they have a deep responsibility toward what is being discussed by an instructor, and that should be facilitated in different ways. For that reason, the views put forth by each student should be given due priority by the teacher.

David Otieno: Sustainability should be integrated into the curriculum through a variety of learning strategies, and this should propel students to solve problems and gather information. As it is said, you can't teach an old dog new tricks, hence sustainability education should start at an early age to enable learners to realize that there are consequences for every action on this planet. This will make interdisciplinary sustainability easy since sustainability is our system and it doesn't matter which field one decides to pursue. This will help us eradicate the idea that sustainability is only for those who have studied the concept, and change it to a thought system that all of us have a responsibility in.

Viniece Jennings: I think that is a really good point because as we are approaching the Rio meeting next year in Brazil, there are going to be conversations on how to educate various groups of people to address these collective issues. So how do you

perceive really getting to the common ground and making progress in sustainability education?

Roger Baud: I believe in physically coming together. I do not believe so much in just information sharing through mass communications or having a conference for three days. I mean, I really believe that you need a meeting for one, two, or even three weeks, and if you would have educators from different countries sharing their experiences, they can bring in their local kind of education system, knowledge, and so on. I think that would be a very important point.

Then you incorporate local needs and you separate them from global needs. This is something we really have to see. We have to separate these kinds of needs because they are not the same. And we have to be careful that we do not overrun the whole world with our western economic, liberal thinking.

Jaya Mahat: I also think it is important to use participatory approaches where there is a two-way communication in which people incorporate their experiences into the learning process. Moreover, this process of two-way communication helps to promote synergy learning impacts.

Roger Baud: I will give you an example from one of our educational seminars called Educators in Sustainability Training (EST). We had a professor from Kazakhstan who mentioned that “In Kazakhstan, if I want to bring in sustainability in my teaching, it is absolutely impossible because it is the government who decides how our education system works.” In other words, the teacher does not have the freedom to change the curricula or what the teacher wants to teach. Then we had the whole meeting, the whole day talking with the teacher, what the teacher could do in order to still somehow bring in sustainability aspects. So this kind of exchange is very important.

David Otieno: We should also not forget that sustainability should start early, not necessarily at the university level, because habits can be difficult to change. If we started at the elementary or kindergarten level, that would give an opportunity for children to influence their parents’ actions, and this generation would grow up knowing different habits that can change the future.

Ahmed Mabrouk: One of the things that I really loved about the course was that it was not addressing sustainability as a science as much as it was addressing or teaching the sustainability belief. The course structure, location, and the passion of instructors were epidemic. Hence, I believe that sustainability should be introduced to students as a concept and way of living rather than just plain information. Teaching tools such as the Ecopolity game (available at: <http://www.frederic-vester.de/eng/ecopolity/>) really helped to connect the infor-

mation that was presented. After the course, it is not that we have gained specific information in a certain branch of sustainability, but all of us, with our different disciplines, came out saturated with belief in the concept.

Viniece Jennings: That is an excellent point. When we have educational experiences where we are constantly in our own silo or groups of like-minded people—we are only looking at problems from that perspective. If you are an accountant and you always learn with accountants, you generally look at a problem a certain way. So a transdisciplinary learning experience was a definite benefit of the YES course.

Ahmed Mabrouk: Yes, and even beyond this, in my case, after the course, sustainability became a passion for me. So education on this concept should be done in a way that will make you rather love the subject and therefore be more likely to apply it in all aspects of your life.

Laila Demashqieh: The YES course was also very beneficial in the sense that it was used to build awareness, and courses similar to YES should be offered in different places around the world.

Jaya Mahat: Along these same lines, I was involved in a project in Nepal which was actually using the concept of community forestry to implement different community-initiated plans and programs, but what I found from my experience was that the active engagement counts a lot for the overall efficiency of such locally initiated activities and thus propels the movement.

David Otieno: Universities should also engage in a lot of exchange programs across the globe to enable cross-cultural learning through teleconferencing, which is now possible and inexpensive—just as this paper was made possible.

Viniece Jennings: A number of you stated how practical skills are very important. There have been discussions across the United States about graduates being concerned that what they learn in the classroom may not be marketable for jobs, or be applicable in solving practical issues. So a competency that the movement can definitely use is an understanding of how one’s education can help solve community and global concerns. What are some of your comments on that?

Roger Baud: Basically, when you are looking for a job, people do not ask you if you have a good knowledge of sustainability. So we are not yet really there. But I know from many YES alumni that having done the YES course helped them to get jobs in sectors like corporate social responsibility or with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or with



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organizations in the environment. Also, many YES alumni have started their own initiatives through ETH Zurich, like Myclimate (www.myclimate.org), and other nations around the world. Last year I completed a small study (available at: www.actis-education.ch) about the long-term impacts from YES students, and I was amazed how many reported that they started their own organizations.

Viniece Jennings: As I reflect on the course, something that I really appreciated was that we not only had technical courses with different types of information, such as finance and the arts, but we also had classes on group dynamics. Looking at things like problem solving, conflict resolution, and really getting the most out of teams were excellent components. In order to reap the benefits of multicultural experiences, one has to be open and yield your perspective to an opportunity to learn about someone else's reality. During the course, the atmosphere was very family oriented. From day one, Dr. Baud set the tone that we were equal, connected, and even if we disagree on something, respect and good spirit must prevail. These are critical skills that can be obtained from a cross-cultural learning experience.

David Otieno: Also, sustainability is a platform for leadership development. Communication skills and analytical reasoning are key parts of sustainability, and this can be developed in cross-cultural environments. Sustainability campaigners should be effective communicators who also walk the walk.

Laila Demashqieh: We need to make sure we're using varied methods with teaching various groups. I think art should be a big part of different types of educational aspects because it enhances creativity, and creativity is very important in obtaining a job. Sustainability should be a key part in training teachers.

David Otieno: Sustainability is a wholesome learning experience—looking at sustainability from a personal level, such as budget and other decisions, is very important. In terms of the overall educational systems, we need to change our vision. We need to reverse the idea that we go to school to get a job, versus going to school and actually improving society.

Roger Baud: I think it is a question of a bottom-up movement. I would like to see students from the YES courses start and support movements at their universities or countries. You can make film evenings, events, and so forth. You present sustainability not as something negative as it can often be portrayed—we have to reduce, reduce, reduce—but you show the positive aspects. Many changes in universities in the past happened through bottom-up movements, if you think of the '68 movement and so on. YES alumni have been involved in several initiatives within their countries as well as collaborations

abroad (e.g., Switzerland, Japan, Kenya, and Brazil). For example, the student association in sustainability in Zurich has a strong presence in the academic community and the general public at large.

Viniece Jennings: Those are exceptional points. My own experience in the YES program led me to write a recent briefing on leadership development (Jennings, 2011).¹ Are there any closing remarks?

Laila Demashqieh: The course really helped me improve the way I live and it improved the way I teach children in different underprivileged areas about sustainability. Being a part of the course helped me create and incorporate awareness of environmental and sustainability issues through the arts. I think that YES has created an active learning community that will produce change.

Jaya Mahat: I believe that the holistic and participatory approach to teaching will be the way that students actively engage in the learning experience. The concept of sustainability incorporates three different pillars—namely, ecology, economy, and society. Thus, all instructors must be able to teach their pupils that these three components of sustainability should remain in a state of relative equilibrium. The cross-cultural learning experience is a great way to facilitate that.

David Otieno: Multicultural sustainability is important in sharing knowledge. The course helped me begin my business, Dirt Solutions, and gain knowledge from other members to develop my focus and initiatives. Global associations like the YES alumni should take their membership to engage in practical problems across the world. The course showed me the value of global networks and my role in them. With this approach, it will enable tangible projects initiated across the globe that are sustainability oriented. This will ensure that members of these associations also work together and share information, which will also fast tract sustainability progress and common ground in sustainability education.

Ahmed Mabrouk: It completely changed my perspective toward life and my career. The course had an awesome impact on me.

Viniece Jennings: The course reminded me that we are products of our culture, but renewing our minds through multicultural learning experiences can help us transform that culture. I am encouraged by the wealth of knowledge I attained when I left my comfort zone. "If you do not refresh your dreams daily, then you will fall into normality," shared one of my YES instructors during breakfast. I hold onto this quote as I continue to develop my vision for the future. I think we sustain what we ultimately value.

Roger Baud: I firmly believe that multicultural environments are an asset to sustainability education. I am glad to hear the knowledge and testimonies from these students. Also, I have been corresponding with Viniece and other contacts to facilitate a YES in the United States soon. She will be very involved in this effort. General information can be accessed at our website: www.actis-education.ch.

Viniece Jennings: That will be an exciting endeavor. Thank you all for your contributions.

References

Jennings V. Teaching Sustainability in Graduate Education: A call for leadership development. *Journal of Sustainability Education* 2011.



Students of the Youth Encounter to Sustainability (YES) Program, Switzerland