

National Sustainable Schools Online Conference 2009

Ken Webster, 6 July 2009

BLOG: Hidden in plain sight: sustainability

There is a great deal of work being done around ESD, for which no doubt many folks are grateful and many a school and its community is finding enriching and encouraging. The danger is that sustainability can mean anything vaguely 'green', anything vaguely tied to 'healthy schools' or gardening or indeed management opportunities to cut energy costs. 'Carbon' seems to be something of a touchstone too and 'low carbon' the aim, and with good reason given climate change and the end of the era of cheap energy. Low carbon and sustainable are also being used interchangeably, which is further evidence that what sustainable implies is getting a tad lost. It's quite possible to be in a low carbon and unsustainable economy, but not for long if you follow my drift!

This is why I have been impressed by the framework emerging from leading designers like Michael Braungart, commercial innovators such as Amory Lovins, leading businesses such as InterfaceFLOR and, for good measure policy at national level within China. Their aspiration is a 'living systems' inspired economy, one where materials cycles are closed and it is run largely on current 'solar' income. It is one where waste = food. It is one where humans have a huge footprint, one which is beneficial (eco-restorative). In this mode what we do in ESD at the moment is variations on education around 'doing less harm', its fatally attached to a linear 'take-make and dispose' framework. As an analogy imagine the slave era, much ESD is the equivalent of asking slave owners if they could perhaps do with 1 slave rather than 2. Shouldn't we be saying we don't think slavery is such a great idea, and that there are better ways? Of course.

This is why I say sustainability is hidden in plain sight. Lots of activity and visibility perhaps not enough reflection on what message it is we wish to share. The future surely needs to be aspirational, the economy productive and eco-restorative and the routes to this explored - if we expect young people to participate.

To those that say this is a conversation too far, given the situation here and now I usually introduce the somewhat Machiavellian comment of a past master at change – Milton Friedman. I add emphasis to one section as it relates particularly to schools in my opinion.

“ . . . it is worth discussing radical changes, not in the expectation that they will be adopted promptly but for two other reasons. One is to construct an ideal goal, so that incremental changes can be judged by whether they move the institutional structure toward or away from that ideal. The other reason is very different. It is so that if a crisis requiring or facilitating radical change does arise, alternatives will be available that have been carefully developed and fully explored.”

Ken Webster, author of Sense and Sustainability (with Craig Johnson)

Links:

<http://www.braungart.com/vision.htm>

http://www.mcdonough.com/writings/cradle_to_cradle-alt.htm