

### A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

- Title: Developing a Network for the Development of Sustainability Education in the Humanities
- Lead: Dr Anthony Sinclair, University of Liverpool  
[hca@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:hca@liverpool.ac.uk)
- Timing: August 2006 – January 2008
- Funding: £3,986
- Keywords: archaeology, humanities, history, archives, information sciences, English

#### AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone in the humanities who is considering education for sustainable development.

#### SUMMARY

The purpose of this project was to build capacity – a network - within the humanities in understanding the relevance of sustainability education to issues facing the fragility of our common material resource, and on the basis of this network to develop strategies/proposals for the development of teaching materials that would have salience for discipline-specific teaching, which could then seek funding on their own merits. The project planned to achieve this by bringing together discipline-specific specialists (both academic and professional) with a record of interest in sustainability as a network, both real and virtual, for discussion and development of sustainability issues within a range of humanities disciplines in higher education.

#### THE APPROACH

The proposed network was planned around two meetings. At the first meeting, subject specialists would be invited to present a discipline-specific perspective on sustainability with case studies of current teaching approaches, and a discipline-centred perspective on the meaning of sustainability. On the basis of this meeting, the delegates present would identify common themes across the disciplines and also work towards developing potential grant bids for a future round of funding. At the second meeting, delegates would present a series of

critical responses to the common themes for a cross-disciplinary approach to sustainability education in the humanities, as well as the presentation of a series of project proposals for the development of teaching materials for sustainability education within the humanities, with a view to seeking further funding related to education for sustainable development.

The project outlined above planned to build capacity in sustainability education in the humanities through:

- (i) The recognition of successful instances of sustainable development education in specific humanities disciplines;
- (ii) The identification of common themes in sustainability education that cross-cut disciplinary boundaries and stimulate critical thinking in sustainability education in the humanities;
- (iii) The development of a series of small projects for the development of teaching and learning materials, both discipline-specific and interdisciplinary that can then seek funding in their own right and further embed the teaching of sustainability in the curricula of local higher education institutions.

#### THE OUTCOMES

A rich debate developed along with the presentation of the papers at the first meeting centring on:

- The moral/ethical dilemmas between public responsibility and the rights of individuals (including corporations) as property owners to use their resources. These moral concerns might also be expanded to include the desire to exploit historical resources for academic interest.
- The lack of understanding of a historical dimension (from the past) within present debates about climate change and sustainable development. In particular it was felt that archaeology could offer a long-term perspective on the nature of human social change in the context of abrupt climate change and over exploitation, whilst there were clear documentary sources to suggest that individuals at previous times (the mid-19th century, for example) had also recognised that contemporary social and economic patterns of development were not sustainable.
- There was a greater need to understand the political/economic and educational context behind the current drive towards developing an education for sustainable development. In this context, it would make strategic sense to understand how universities were developing university-wide policies to introduce such an element of teaching into their current curricula.
- Sustainability needed to 'embrace' a community which would include both encouraging a community to become involved in and passionate about the sustainability of their own resources, and the sustainability of active communities of practice in their own right. This latter element was particularly relevant to a number of humanities communities whose work is of fundamental value to a population in general, and yet apparently little valued

within the contemporary political, social and educational context due to their perceived marginal or esoteric or 'useless' (in a utilitarian sense) nature.

A rich debate grew out of the papers presented at the second meeting. Key themes considered included detailed discussion about:

- the nature of property ownership;
- the differing value of landscape studies in humanities disciplines (currently very high in archaeology, and low in history) and the centrality of landscape and community to sustainable development;
- the value of developing a 'sustainable education for career professionals' within the humanities – exploring the ways in which elements of subjects, learning, research, the humanities and ownership might relate to the rights of such bodies as the Higher Education Academy, Professional Societies, Professional Individuals, NGOs, HEFCE, the State and the Media; and,
- the limits created by disciplinary boundaries and module/course boundaries.

#### TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This network came out of an archaeology background, making the assumption that an emphasis on the fragility of the material record could provide a common base from which discussion could positively develop that could encompass all the humanities. The purpose of the original proposal was to bring individuals from a variety of different disciplines and backgrounds within the humanities together, and on the basis of this to develop a network of productive relationships for future projects related to the teaching of issues related to sustainable development. The number of attendees at the first meeting (see discussion below), and the absence of a clear second round for which to prepare bids for the development of specific teaching resources (as noted above) necessitated a change to the originally-intended purpose of the second meeting, with a new focus on the extended discussion of key themes identified at the first meeting.

Despite the small number of delegates at the meetings of the Network, and perhaps the over-representation of individuals from an archaeological perspective, the breadth of discussion has indicated that there is a wide range of themes and issues that would form a good basis for future development into themes that could be taken up by individuals in higher education as a means of engaging students in the issues of sustainable development within the curriculum, whilst at the same time engaging with deeper philosophical and critical issues that will be salient to specific disciplinary communities in the humanities.

For example:

1. For disciplines that focus on the understanding of events over short time scales, an appreciation of human response to change (climate change, resource change) over the longer term enables individuals to appreciate unintended consequences of action

2. Focusing on the failure of civilisations, and the problems of the unintended consequences of action that lead to un-sustained development of past civilisations
3. Historical investigation of past moments when the need for 'sustainable development' was recognised, and the particular contemporary context of globalisation and the seeming powerlessness of communities
4. Questioning the health of community engagement in disciplines such as archaeology, and in so doing develop long-term, sustainable communities of practice for heritage research and conservation
5. An understanding of the many dimensions of landscape (cultural, natural, visual, belonging), and the ways in which communities root themselves in places
6. The conflict between sustainable development and the development of a world economy, but also evaluating a discipline's research needs against the broader needs of energy supply and conservation
7. A focus on 'property' encapsulating ways of considering the effects and the potential limitations of market thinking. For example, there are problems in setting the limits on the private freedom to use in the context of public responsibility to save, and how this relates to notions of property
8. A philosophical investigation of the understanding of sustainability across the humanities so that we can bridge the disciplinary barriers that keep discussions contained within discrete disciplinary groups

Significantly, the extreme diversity of ways in which the concept of sustainability has been interpreted in all the disciplines represented at these meetings suggests that there is a need for some sustained research into the philosophical/historical underpinnings of sustainability as a concept.

A number of themes did not develop which I had originally thought would come through as important to understanding the full breadth of sustainable development:

1. The (over-) reliance on digital archives, and their inherent fragility and likely destruction without careful management. This is particularly germane to the humanities communities following the recent withdrawal of funding to the Arts and Humanities Data Service
2. The sustainability of contemporary language communities, and the loss of understanding of past languages

There is clearly quite a bit of capacity building that still needs to be achieved before an active and, more importantly, self-sustaining network of individuals from across the humanities could be claimed to be in existence. If the network were to proceed forwards along the originally proposed lines, experience suggests that a significantly more pro-active approach will be needed; this will require the employment of an individual whose specific remit is to locate and

'encourage' attendance at future events from disciplines beyond archaeology, and perhaps history.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report (including details of presentations) is available:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/esd\\_sinclair.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/esd_sinclair.pdf) (PDF132KB)