

A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

Title: ESD Interdisciplinary Discussion Series

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AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone wishing to look at the issues surrounding sustainability and interdisciplinarity in the curriculum, as well as to those wishing to replicate an interdisciplinary discussion series.

SUMMARY

This series of three meetings was conceived to enable a group of academics to examine the challenges posed by the coincidence of two challenging topics: interdisciplinarity and education for sustainable development (ESD). The specific intentions for the ESD discussion series were to:

1. support dialogue between academics in relation to the intellectual and pedagogical issues surrounding interdisciplinarity and ESD;

2. provide a forum for academics to develop their understanding of the ways that they might work with the parameters and principles of interdisciplinary ESD;
3. inform the strategic agenda for the ESD Project on the issues at stake in the intersections of 'ESD', 'sustainability' and 'interdisciplinarity'.

RATIONALE

The prompt for the series was a meeting of academics from six disciplines in the social and historical sciences, which took place as part of an exploratory ESD inquiry undertaken jointly by the Subject Centre for History, Classics & Archaeology (HCA) and the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology & Politics (C-SAP). The meeting revealed substantial complexities around interdisciplinary work related to sustainability, both across the human and social sciences, and via collaborations and connections with the natural sciences.

Colleagues in the network of Subject Centres were in support of further interdisciplinary activities to enable academics to address the ways that ESD cuts across the traditional boundaries of *naturwissenschaft* and *geisteswissenschaft**. There was general agreement that, while individual disciplines could contribute valuably to ESD programmes, a rounded approach would necessarily be interdisciplinary. There are well-developed areas of expertise in sustainability (many of them overtly interdisciplinary), yet there was a perceived need for greater understanding of the range of issues regarding interdisciplinary ESD across the HE sector. There has been recognition within Subject Centres that ESD debates should take place between academics in particular disciplines and those working in broader multidisciplinary contexts, so that mutual feedback and embedding is enhanced in both spheres.

THE APPROACH

Twenty-seven participants engaged in this debate over the course of three meetings. Each participant had an active teaching and/or research engagement with sustainability and an orientation towards interdisciplinary work. To our knowledge, this was the first attempt to provide extended discussion space to a group of academics active in this area across a wide range of disciplines and institutions. The terrain for this debate was exciting but complex: the tension between aims 1 and 2 above required a sustained space for intellectual exploration while at the same time maintaining a sense of contextualization.

Overviews of the design for this series (see Section 2 of full report below) and the facilitation reflections (Section 4) demonstrate some of the challenges encountered and some of the lessons learned. In Section 3, the findings from these discussions are organized according to three main areas: interdisciplinarity and disciplines; delivery and pedagogy; and organizational and sectoral issues. Section 5 contains a concluding summary and Section 6 makes recommendations for further progress. Participants' evaluation responses, notes

* the natural sciences and the humanities, respectively

captured during the series and other supporting materials have been used to create this report.

THE OUTCOMES

As expected, definitions of ESD were varied, as were views on the value of extracting definitions: instead of engaging in extended attempts to agree a definition, it was proposed within the group that 'sustainability' is a 'threshold concept' orientated to the 'ideal', a concept whose very richness and importance lies in its thwarting stable definitions. Hence a range of views were identified on the manner in which interdisciplinary ESD might be developed and located in HE curricula, and the ways that such provision might be taught and learned. The focus was towards pedagogies supporting skills development, particularly skills for dealing with pluralism in the different value systems at stake. This was not to devalue the material under consideration; rather to put the emphasis on the use to which student and teacher alike put that material in order to clarify their understanding of sustainability.

Interdisciplinary approaches to ESD were considered essential, but the discussions showed that 'interdisciplinary' might be interpreted more widely. Rather than simply the bringing together of two or more academic disciplines within an academic programme, it ought to include, for example, professional (and therefore 'inter-professional') perspectives. Questions were raised about the nature of enterprise within the HE sector and tactical ways to encourage structural changes supportive of interdisciplinary ESD. A distinct need was identified for clearer information about students' pre-HE backgrounds and educational interests, their career intentions and employment prospects, as they relate to interdisciplinary ESD.

These findings are in many ways congruent with the broader aims of skills and employability agendas presently of particular interest to those responsible for HE recruitment and programme provision, as well as with the objectives of the UK Sustainable Development Education Panel. Participants expressed a strong desire to take forward ideas from the seminar series, in their own institutions, between institutions, and in and between disciplines. These proposals remain 'on the table' pending allocation of a further tranche of funding. By their very nature – frequently inter-institutional and interdisciplinary – it is difficult for these proposals to secure conventional funding (e.g., from HEI Teaching and Learning Development funds).

TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This attempt to uncover parameters for a strategic agenda on interdisciplinarity and ESD is intended to be of use to the HE Academy ESD Project, as well as to other colleagues and stakeholders within and beyond academia.

The following recommendations are made for future resource and capacity development:

1 Capacity Building: project grants for interdisciplinary ESD

Small project awards are perhaps the most significant means of investing in materials curriculum development within and between HEIs and disciplines. The first 15 small grant awards made by the ESD Project are currently submitting their findings and participants in this interdisciplinary discussion series generated a number of new proposals. The findings of these projects could inform the resource development project suggested in recommendation 3.

2 Capacity Building: interdisciplinary ESD networking

Events bringing academics together on matters relating to sustainability teaching and research will continue to generate fruitful collaborations and participants specifically requested such continuity and development of the interdisciplinary ESD network. A network of interdisciplinary PG students is being encouraged via the C-SAP Subject Centre, though further funds would be necessary to develop capacity at this level.

3 Resource Development: disciplinary & interdisciplinarity in ESD

Given further funding, the ESD Project could integrate existing work across the Subject Centres on disciplinary perspectives and the emergent interdisciplinary contexts for ESD. Where necessary, buying out the expertise of discipline-based academics to make contributions would add intellectual credibility and ensure effective linkage between research and pedagogy. There is potential for a team publication and for a significant electronic curriculum resource, including good practice examples and related conceptual and professional issues.

4 Resource Development: sustainability policy & funding digests

The creation of a resource to guide academics and students around the range of sustainability-related policy available would be an invaluable tool for HE, as well as for the broader education community. This might include local, national, European and global policy digests, plus reports from educational and political organizations. Information is also needed about sustainability-related funding for academic and partnership work from HE sectoral bodies, third sector, governmental and international sources.

5 Stakeholder Dialogue: further workshops and events

One of the most important outcomes of this exploration has been the need to progress the discussions on interdisciplinarity by connecting them to the views of other stakeholders. The next step would be to organize events to engage parties identified during the discussion series and through other ESD Project activities: HEI senior managers; professional organisations and business networks; careers and admissions staff; student and community organisations; representatives from HE sectoral bodies and from relevant initiatives in pre-HE education.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report is available from:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/ta/sustainability/interdisc_discuss_series2008.pdf