

Engaged learning and enterprise through the 'Ecoversity': Implementing an engagement theory to meet sustainability concerns

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Abstract

Education has provided little leadership and few conceptual tools to assist us to better understand our place in leading the world towards a more sustainable future. We continue to educate society in ways oblivious to the mounting crisis of unsustainability (Orr, 1992) and rely instead on institutionalism, managerialism, cerebral capitalism and neoliberal constructs which have proven spectacularly disastrous in dealing with these critical matters. While universities have taken contradictory roles at various points through time, they have invariably reflected and challenged the culture of the day, tolerated diverse viewpoints, generated new ideas and inculcated wisdom. To do otherwise would be to produce 'people who will spend life locked in the prison of an untutored, unquestioning mind', and is 'probably the best way to ensure that catastrophe triumphs' It makes sense therefore that universities be at the centre of efforts to deal with sustainability matters.

We argue that the concept of the 'ecoversity' offers universities a useful framework for their own sustainability transformation and engagement with human capital and regional communities to tackle global sustainability matters in practical ways through relational learning in knowledge production and distribution. We also argue the 'ecoversity' is a vehicle for the practical implementation of an emerging theory of ethical engagement by universities of the kind proposed by Garlick and Palmer (2008) that sees curricular learning connected to relational ethics, community priorities and global concerns, as well as to their own greening operations and resident wildlife (Carter, Garlick, Matthews & Mayes, 2008; Garlick, Matthews & Smith, 2009).

The 'ecoversity' concept has at its heart the notion of leading by example to ensure that daily activities engage students and communities in understanding and active participation in what it means to address the 'unsustainable core characteristics of our time' (Jucker, 2002, p. 10). It provides a framework for relational learning and doing that connects the 'green campus' with curricular development, and extends into external partnerships and community relationships (Garlick, Matthews & Smith, 2009). It is a framework for all universities to engage on sustainability matters with their regional communities.

The review of literature will include themes of relational and contextual ethics (Bauman, 1995; Bauman, 2001; Davidson, 2000; Derrida, 2008; Smith, 2001), the role of higher education and its purpose in a world under threat (Arthur, 2004; Constandine & Marginson, 2000; Orr, 1991), ethics and university and community engagement (Garlick & Palmer, 2008) and the concept of the ecoversity (Garlick, Matthews & Smith, 2009).

Examples of university engagement with sustainability beyond the 'green campus' are drawn from the University of Bradford and the University of Plymouth in the UK.

The University of Bradford has branded itself an 'ecoversity', while the University of Plymouth ranks second on the UK green universities ranking.

The conclusions drawn are that solutions to some of the major global issues of the day, such as sustainability, must go beyond assumptions of human rationality. Scientific and technological achievement and current instrumentalist views of education, particularly higher education, as simply a means of gaining financial advantage and enhancing reputation, are not sufficient. We propose the ecoversity as a model of engagement to build new understandings of ourselves and our relationships with human and non-human others and with nature, and develop new ways of putting these engagements into practice. The ecoversity concept points towards an as yet indistinct sustainable future, but does not pre-emptively exclude future hopes and future possibilities.

Introduction

Engaging with difference

If for planetary sustainability we need a widespread human behavioural transformation from pervasive ingrained neoliberal anthropocentrism focusing only on human interest and those aspects of the physical landscape that bring utilitarian value, towards a biocentrism in which nature is respected for its uniqueness, wonder and connection to place through a relational ethic (King, 1997), how are we to do it? Education, the area to which we usually first turn for human transformation, has failed us when it comes to environmental matters (Orr, 1992); and 'institutional thickness' increasingly offloads the non-economic to 'third sector' agencies. Meanwhile, neocons assume a 'greenwash' persona to infiltrate these (otherwise well-meaning) 'third sector' environmental organisations; and universities increasingly move to funding-dependent behaviour (Garlick & Palmer, 2008). It is a daunting task. Where do we begin any transformation and how do we make the connection between theory and practice in an economy and society in which entity-based managerialism and risk aversion predominate and institutional discussion invariably centres on monetary cost and profit rather than on the common good?

Jamison (1998) suggests that to begin to address the contested terrain of environmental sustainability, its values, epistemologies and vocabulary, in order to ensure balance in current anthropocentric and economistic notions about nature, there is a need for:

...a discourse that permits deeper discussion of aesthetic, spiritual, religious, cultural, political, and moral values...it is possible that the present disorder regarding the human relationship to nature will not be successfully addressed until we have developed a richer set of positive visions regarding the proper human relationship to nature...and how to engage in ongoing dialogue with others about how our everyday actions help to produce global realities. Articulating these visions is not the job of academics alone, but also requires the efforts of writers, artists, and people from all walks of life (p. 191).

The crisis of sustainability comprises problematic relationships and problematic understandings of those relationships. It is:

...both a crisis of the ways modern capitalist societies combine with nature and a crisis of understanding whereby the citizens of those societies fail to understand their relations with nature (Huckle, 2004, p. 34).

Addressing these relationship challenges and understandings about global and local environmental sustainability within a context of a widening divide between humans and nature is what we have set ourselves to contribute to in this paper; a task we believe ought to take us beyond discourse and into real action. Elsewhere, we have suggested engaged learning and enterprising action contextualised by place and relational ethics as a framework that could assist with this (Garlick & Matthews 2008 & 2009; Garlick, Matthews & Smith 2009). In this paper, we build on these principles by promoting the 'ecoversity' as a university-community engagement mechanism that can accommodate difference among and between humans and nature in a learning environment that respects wonderment and uniqueness and generates practical outcomes of sustainability that are of ethical worth.

Following poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, we begin the task by recognising the significance of difference among and between humans and nature in various contexts – difference that requires close observation and relational (or engaged) learning, in the form of a *modus vivendi* (Naess, 1979) or *sensus communis* (Smith, 2001) that involves metaphysical as well as physical attributes, and a responsibility to act ethically in relation to these differences. Levinas (1991) has defined this relational ethic as an 'ethics of encounter' where the 'other' is revealed through its difference to us. Derrida (2002) however notes that a relational ethic can only manifest if, having become aware of an engagement need with a different 'other', there is responsibility for action beyond the encounter, as it opens up possibilities for the future that no prior knowledge might have identified. To suggest a human/animal or human/nature binary or separation is to assume a reductionist or universalist approach that only strengthens any such divide and limits our learning about future directions.

Engaging with difference assumes no pre-determined conclusions about the particular 'other', or the direction the engagement might take. There are no relevant principles or rules governing the acquisition of knowledge from the other through the engagement process, although as Buber (1965) explains, a prelude to this requires a resistance to objectification and an acceptance of a mutuality in understanding. In humanist terms, Bauman (1995) has defined his 'being for' form of togetherness along these lines:

Being tied to the Other by emotional means, on the other hand, that I am responsible for her/him, and most of all for what my action or inaction may do to her/him (p. 63).

The parable of *Le Petit Prince* (de Saint-Exupery, 1991) and the Prince's devotion to his rose and his meeting with the wise fox demonstrates this same level of responsibility to engaged learning between the human and the non-human.

Next we suggest knowledge and learning. Here, following Orr (1992), we make the distinction between 'good', 'useful' and 'bad' knowledge, in sustainability discourse and action. This immediately presents us with a difficulty. Derrida (in Zylinska, 2005) noted this difficulty with regard to a failure to inquire into the full spectrum of interconnected possibilities and the consequential difficulty in presenting what 'ought to be' as opposed to simply 'what is'.

Specifically on matters to do with sustainability, Orr (1992) rightly reminds us that lack of an ecoliteracy in our education system has significantly contributed to our planet's current sustainability crisis:

On balance, I think we are becoming more ignorant because we are losing knowledge about how to inhabit our places on the planet sustainably, while impoverishing the genetic knowledge accumulated through millions of years of evolution. And some of the presumed knowledge we are gaining, given our present state of social, political and cultural evolution, is dangerous; much of it is monumentally trivial (p. 152)

and

A great deal of what passes as knowledge is little more than abstraction piled on top of abstraction, disconnected from tangible experience, real problems and the places where we live and work. (Orr, 2005, p. 88).

A second significant difficulty that needs to be addressed is based around the suggestion we have made elsewhere (Garlick, Matthews & Smith, 2009) that universities play an important role in sustainability solutions by facilitating engaged discourse and enterprising human capital through their dual functions of teaching and learning and research and innovation. We suggest that universities have a key leadership role in this because of their focus on learning and knowledge creation and distribution, their spatial distribution and their relative institutional freedom of thought and expression. However, again as Orr observes: '...under certain conditions, education might exert a positive influence on ecological behaviour, but these conditions by and large do not now prevail. Higher education, particularly in prestigious universities, is often animated by other forces, including those of pecuniary advantage and prestige.' (p. 150). Elsewhere, we have concluded that universities have failed Boyer's (1996) test of the common good:

There is an assumption that the engaged relations between a university and its regional and local community is about creating something that is good for society and the environment in the traditional Dewey (1956) and Boyer (1996) way. In a heavily dominated neo-liberal world this public good perspective is a hopeful generalisation as, despite well publicised individual engagement good news stories, we know (however unfortunate or unfair that it sounds) that many universities engage only consequentially for recognition, prestige and power (Author & Palmer, 2008, p. 1).

A third difficulty with adopting a relational learning and doing approach towards our concerns about sustainability occurs within any community that desires to be an integral part of a learning program that is engaged with nature. Bauman (2007) notes the trend to community homogeneity, rather than difference, and a distrust of diversity and 'otherness' in a liquid neo-liberal world, giving rise to 'mixophobia' in communities. In such fragmented places all that can be expected are 'being-aside' and 'being-with' forms of togetherness (Bauman, 1995). Such forms of togetherness are limited to episodic and usually competitive encounters of individuals, in which they are seen as objects or entities rather than humans, non-human animals, or meaningful landscape, with all their respective and respected intrinsic qualities.

Smith's (2001) work around space and place also provides a context to mould the proximity of humans and nature into communities with moral and ethical values. His position gives humans the tools and the space to engage in a genuine dialectic, not only with each other but with the physical environment, rather than have their values determined by outside institutional forces.

Sustainability is 'about the terms and conditions of human [we would say planetary] survival', it points to a crisis and yet 'we still educate at all levels as if no such crisis existed' (Orr, 1992, p. 83). How we educate and what we do over the next thirty years is critical, something that is now being recognized in recent declarations and networks for sustainability such as, for example, University World News (<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20090524091553918>) and the Talloires network (<http://www.tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork/?pid=151&c=62>).

In this paper we propose the model of the 'ecoversity' as a theoretical and practical framework that enables discourse and enterprising action through a process of place-specific relational learning between interest groups and nature. Our goal for higher education in this approach is to find practical and theoretical alternatives to the unrelational and unsustainable practices 'that got us into trouble in the first place'. (Orr, 1992, p. 24). The ecoversity approach proposes lifelong learning and enterprising action within an institutional and spatial context that focuses on sustainability issues and their solutions. Moreover, the ecoversity approach promotes a new and dynamic community-based form of ecoliteracy; one which involves relational learning about the sustainability of nature.

The role of higher education and its purpose in a world under threat

Universities have taken on contradictory roles at various points over time. They have reflected and challenged the culture of the day, be it oppressive or democratic, and have sometimes repressed, but invariably tolerated, diverse viewpoints. While it has been argued that historically, they have responded to rather than initiated social change (Silver, 2007), they nevertheless have the capacity to generate new ideas, innovate, and inculcate wisdom (Arthur, 2004; Constandine & Marginson, 2000; Orr, 1992). We argue that universities should quite rightly be at the centre of efforts to deal with sustainability matters and that to do otherwise, would be to produce 'people who will spend life locked in the prison of an untutored, unquestioning mind', and is 'probably the best way to ensure that catastrophe triumphs' (Arthur, 2004, p. 149).

Unfortunately however, the triumph of catastrophe now looms large on our horizon. The geological records, scientific data, and computer models analysed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007 unequivocally affirm the warming of the climate system. Global mean temperatures are close to 2-3 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures. Global warming has been directly linked to human activity and despite all we know and have known about climate change science, global greenhouse gas emissions have increased by seventy per cent in the last thirty years (IPCC, 2007). Antarctic glaciers are already melting faster than previously anticipated. The UN benchmark for avoiding dangerous risk of irreversible climate change is to keep average global temperatures from rising more than two degrees. The Australian Government's plan to cut emissions to 5 – 15 per cent below 2000 levels by 2020, and by 60 per cent by 2050, are much weaker levels than those required of other developed nations. The Australian targets will not achieve climate protection, and even if every nation on Earth were to adopt and succeed in meeting Australian targets, global emissions would still be at a level inconsistent with long-term climate protection (Wilkinson, 2009). Even if GHG levels remain constant, and we halt emissions immediately, a further warming of one degree per decade is expected (IPCC, 2007, p. 45). An increase of six degrees will eliminate most life on Earth. This occurred 251 million years ago, when 95 per cent of the world's species were wiped out.

Currently 20-30 per cent of species risk extinction. According to the WWF report (2008) 'Australia already has the worst rate of mammal extinctions in the world' and '40 percent of mammal extinctions globally in the last 200 years have occurred in Australia'. Despite a relatively small population, Australians have managed to wreak havoc on a unique and fragile natural environment in a very short time period. Many species are only found in certain locations and settings. For instance, in April this year *The Australian* reported that Carnaby's Black Cockatoo is on the brink of extinction (Laurie, 2009). Carnaby's Black Cockatoos can only nest in very old gum trees in a small area of South Western Australia and land clearing has destroyed their nesting sites and their food source. To ensure their survival we need to restore their habitat in this part of Australia.

Governments in Australia and worldwide appear unable to act effectively on these critical environmental issues - a consequence perhaps of decades of entrenched post-colonialism, managerialism, cerebral capitalism and neoliberal practices. Through the Internet and global media, a dual local-global phenomenon is now appearing. Environmental activism previously predominantly related to local place-based environmental issues, has taken on a global relevance, and conversely, rapid engagement with and implementation of global environmental agendas has underlined, and renewed awareness of, the significance of the local level (Martello & Jasanoff, 2006).

In their accounts of institutions and processes designed to address global environmental governance Martello and Jasanoff (2006) argue that three things need to happen. First, global environmental governance solutions require local opportunities for expression; second, we need to realise that the identification, understanding and representation of environmental problems relates to the ways in which we choose to address problems. In other words, environmental knowledge is not objective or distinct from the power-knowledge formations of science and the local and national and supra-national politics that identify certain problems as meriting attention. Finally, effective governance requires innovations in power-knowledge formations to achieve well-articulated mechanisms of communication, translation and interaction.

For American sustainability educator David Orr (1992) it is not simply global governance that has failed us, but also the failure of education to educate. Education has offered few clear directions and conceptual tools to assist us to better understand ourselves and our responsibility to lead the world towards a more sustainable future. Indeed, many of the environmental problems we now face were actually created by educated people and this suggests that we need a different education, not more of the same (Orr, 1992). Through the concept of the ecoversity we believe there is an opportunity for a changed approach to learning and action that respects notions of difference through a context-grounded and wider relational ethic with global relevance.

The concept of the ecoversity

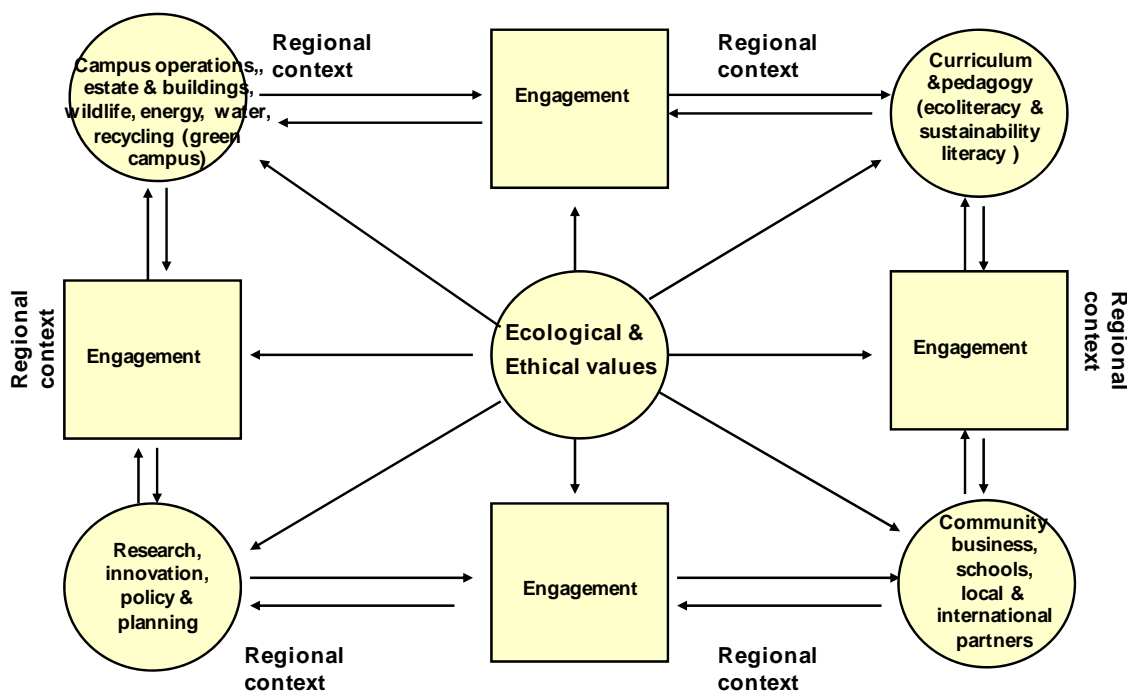
We argue that the concept of the 'ecoversity' offers universities a multi-objective vehicle for undertaking their own sustainability transformation, for building a stock of ecoliterate and enterprising human capital, and for engaging with their regional communities to tackle global sustainability matters in practical ways. The 'ecoversity' is a vehicle for the practical implementation and further development of an emerging theory of ethics and engagement by universities of the kind proposed by Garlick and Palmer (2008) that sees learning and research connected to relational ethics, community priorities and global concerns in relation to their own teaching, research, governance, greening operations and resident wildlife (Garlick, Matthews & Smith, 2009).

The 'ecoversity' concept has at its heart the notion of leading by example to ensure that daily activities engage students and communities in understanding and active participation in what it means to address the 'unsustainable core characteristics of our time' (Jucker, 2002, p. 10). It provides a framework for engaged learning among and between different people and with the diversity of nature and so connects but goes beyond the 'green campus' and sustainable curricular development, and into external partnerships and relationships (Garlick, Matthews & Smith, 2009).

The ecoversity concept is a holistic approach to education for sustainability based on ecological values and ethics. It is an approach which models practical and local applications in engagements through:

- Campus operations, estate and buildings, wildlife, energy, water, recycling (green campus)
- Curriculum and pedagogy (ecoliteracy and sustainability literacy)
- Research, innovation, policy and planning for the common good
- Community, businesses, schools, local and international partners.

Below is a refinement of a previously-developed schematic (Garlick & Matthews, 2008) which locates ecological and ethical values at the core of the ecoversity approach, to take into account both natural and artificial systems.



Examples of university efforts at engagement with sustainability beyond the 'green campus' can be found in the University of Bradford and the University of Plymouth in the UK. The University of Bradford branded itself an 'ecoversity' in 2005. Initially concerned with campus greening, Bradford took the opportunity to explore ways of promoting the health and wellbeing of staff and students, to create stronger links with local communities, and to undertake design and construction work based on agreed sustainability criteria.

'Ecoversity' was established as a university program, with a program manager and board to oversee the development of four project objectives: environment, community, education for sustainable development and economy. The University of Plymouth was awarded a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning – Education for Sustainable Development (CETL-ESD) award from the Higher Education Funding Council for England for a five-year period from 2005. The award was in recognition of existing and potential excellence in the sustainability field and provided for the establishment of a Centre for Sustainable Futures (CSF) with a remit to transform the University into an 'institution modeling university-wide excellence' in sustainability. To accomplish this aim CSF developed the '4C' approach to change, addressing the four dimensions of Curriculum, Campus, Community and (institutional) Culture. The model is the basis of the university's sustainability policy and strategic action plan to ensure the embedding of sustainability beyond 2010.

Following Sacks (2008), the goal of the ecoversity is to teach us what we are a part of. It does this by sharing knowledge, identifying local/global problems and solutions, stimulating ethical debates, challenging unsustainable development and the excesses of transnational capitalism (Garlick, Matthews & Smith, 2009). It is not therefore that sustainability should be integrated into universities, but that universities need to transform themselves into the integrated holistic communities implied by sustainability perspectives (Sterling, 2004). Elsewhere (Author & Palmer, 2008), we have argued that a theory of engagement will embrace characteristics of Bauman's ideal form of togetherness, 'being-for', supported by learning and a relational ethic that responds to difference in a spatial or community context. With this in mind, in the next section we discuss engaged learning approaches and locate them in an ecoversity framework. In the final section, we propose that an ecoversity approach is a theory of learning engagement which has at its core an understanding of relational and contextual ethics as applied to difference in and among humans and nature.

Engaged learning and the 'Ecoversity'

The educational legacy of John Dewey's work has taken engaged learning in two directions. The first relates to experiential, place-based learning approaches and the second to the 'scholarship of engagement' work of Ernest Boyer. In this section we discuss these approaches and argue that an 'ecoversity' approach incorporates components of both, such that the limits of each are addressed by the provision of a relational/contextual ethical core relating to ecological and environmental values.

Experiential learning is based on Dewey's argument that learning involves processes of active inquiry and that students learn better by doing, and through engagement and reflection on meaningful activities intended to devise solutions to real world problems (Quay, 2003). Engaged pedagogies enable learners to take responsibility for their own learning through interactions with others and the learning context to address authentic issues and problems for the common good. Learners become more motivated and work more effectively in collaborative groups and processes of interaction with teachers, educational settings, and cultural discourses (Quay, 2003). 'Situated learning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) seeks to address misunderstandings that may arise from decontextual learning by locating learning in particular learning conditions. 'Communities of practice' are groups of people engaged in shared learning and human endeavor; examples might include engineers working on similar problems or artists seeking new forms of expression (Wenger, 2007).

Similar approaches are found in 'place-based education', a term used to refer to 'environmental education', 'outdoor education', 'service learning' and 'experiential education' (Knapp, 2005). In line with the work of the American ecologist and environmentalist Aldo Leopold, place-based learning highlights the importance of experience and interdisciplinary means of learning about the land in a way that embodies sensitivity to nature, aesthetics and ethics (Knapp, 2005).

One problem with place-based learning approaches is the assumption that the direct engagements provided by a nature-based experience automatically generate connections and commitment to nature. The problem, as Russell (1999) puts it, is that environmental issues are so urgent and pressing that educators have had little time to reflect on the assumptions implicit in their theory and practice. Our position is similar to that of conservationists, where despite enormous effort, passion and commitment, little appears to change:

We dart about, stamping at tiny smoulders in the carpet, rushing from hot spot to hot spot when all the while the roof is racing to a fire-storm and the walls are creaking towards collapse. People in the 'line' of conservation fire-fighting (there is nothing you could call "staff") have rarely had the time to draw back and take a painstaking look at what we are actually doing (Livingston, 1981, p. 13).

It has been argued that the immediate, concrete experience emphasized by many proponents of experiential learning misinterprets Dewey's understanding of the relationship of experience to reflection (Miettinen, 2000). For Dewey experience is saturated with cultural and historical interpretations, such that what may appear to be fresh empirical experience may simply be everyday habits overlaid with cultural misconceptions. The capacity to involve oneself fully and openly in new experiences and to generate reflections and change is less straightforward than proponents of experiential education often suppose and 'the testimony of experience often means seeing though through the lens of the established and tradition, the self-evident' (Miettinen, 2000, p. 68). Dewey argues that learning requires a reflective analysis of philosophical cultural, social and psychological conditions (Miettinen, 2000). Dewey argues that primary experience is based in the habits and routines of everyday life. Problems, crisis and uncertainty occur when these no longer work. Primary experience gives rise to secondary experience, where the 'known' things of the environment are 'intellectualised' and constructed as objects of reflection, knowledge, thought and inquiry. A tentative working hypothesis is formulated and tested by thought and experiment and in light of available knowledge and resources. Only then is it applied in practice.

For Boyer (1990) engagement is an ethical imperative which requires universities to connect academic scholarship to the public sphere by producing of life-enhancing knowledge that serves the world by solving social problems (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). Boyer's *scholarship of engagement* supplements the *scholarship of discovery* which comprises basic research concerned with advancing human knowledge. The scholarship of engagement requires universities to devise innovative activities which cut across disciplinary boundaries and the traditional triumvirate of teaching, research, and service. In Boyer's (1990) terms:

The most important obligation now confronting the nation's colleges and universities is to break out of the old tired teaching versus research debate and define, in creative ways, what it means to be a scholar (Boyer, 1990, p. xii).

By engaging university scholarship with contemporary social problems, schools and communities, universities become an important locus for social action and change.

Unfortunately the approach to engaged scholarship popularised by Van de Ven (2007) misses the opportunity to relate to new forms of engaged learning and enterprise. It therefore misses the opportunity to address the big picture questions Boyer had in mind. Two further concerns occur to us in relation to the ethics of engaged learning. Firstly, the ethical biases and risks associated with collaborative research, where partners may have vested interests in the production of certain kinds of knowledge, as well as in limiting circulation of and access to knowledge in order to secure profits and monopolies.

Secondly, the respect for difference and openness to alternative understandings that are implicit and yet under-explored in 'scholarship of engagement' approaches. Below we propose that in relation to questions of sustainability what is required is the development of a relational or contextual ethics appropriate to engaged learning and enterprise.

Relational and contextual ethics

We have so far argued the problem of sustainability is such that we need a change in higher education. The ecoversity approach represents an innovative and creative effort in this direction. Above we point to the ethical gaps in current engaged learning and scholarship. In this section we sketch the outlines of a relational and contextual ethics, which heeds Derridian critiques concerning the limits of contemporary western philosophy, to further an understanding of ourselves in relation to other living beings and nature.

The Australian environmental activist Ian Lowe observes:

Fundamentally, the present world is a long way from having the values needed for the transition to sustainability. We also don't yet have the knowledge base we need to interact sustainably with natural systems. Great changes can in principle be made by policy reform, which could dramatically cut resource demands and environmental consequences of our lifestyle, but the political will to implement such a strategy is nowhere in sight (Lowe, 2007).

Communities require a knowledge base that informs them about the complex natural systems of the earth so that they can make responsible and sustainable choices (Lowe, 2007). Importantly, this knowledge base and values require an ethics able to recognise the relationships of all beings to one another and an understanding of the dangers of dualistic forms of thought that separate human from animal, and nature from culture (see Plumwood, 1992; Warren, 1996). While ecological feminism offers a sound critique of these dualisms, it has yet to develop a relational ethic (Jenson, 2002). A Derridian philosophical perspective assumes that to understand ourselves and others requires that we interrogate how we come to understand ourselves in relation to others, where 'others' can be taken to refer to 'nature' in all its wonder, distinctiveness and uniqueness.

Derrida argues that western philosophy restricts our ability to understand ourselves – our being. We are only able to understand ourselves in relation to animal beings and this limits how we can understand ourselves and our place on this planet in the same way that De Saint-Exupery's *Le Petit Prince* tried to understand when he arrived on Earth from his small planet. This, as said earlier, he only discovered in relating to a fox, rather than to the powerful, conceited, weak, superficial, and greedy humans he met on his travels to Earth. Unfortunately, our representations of animals have enabled humans to be defined or understood as civilised, cultured, superior and human *because* animals are uncivilised, uncultured, inferior and bestial. In other words, our understanding of others in such terms creates an understanding of ourselves that occludes understanding of animal-others *in their own terms*. This is not the way to a relational ethic with nature that can meet the sustainability requirements of the planet.

The title of Derrida's essay, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, plays with the Cartesian idea that we are thinking animals. If this is the case, what else might follow? One thing that follows is that we have a limited understanding of the astonishing plurality of beings contained by the term 'animal'. The second thing is that we are only able to express what we are not – namely that we are not animals. Western philosophy does not help us to understand the beings that we are. What is it that makes 'humanity' and what has to be excluded so that we can regard ourselves as 'humanity'?

A third consequence is that we fail to understand the historical, philosophical, rhetorical and religious forms of thought that constrain or enable the kinds of questions we are able to ask about ourselves and about others. Questions such as 'does their communication mean they talk?' 'Does their similarity to us mean they are like us?' 'Do we have a duty of care to sentient beings we eat and experiment on?' Finally, and most problematically, Derrida suggests that what follows could be that the conceptual and actual violence humanity perpetrates against the 'animal' fundamentally constitutes our very notions of responsibility and ethics.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn are that solutions to some of the most significant global issues of the day, such as sustainability, must go beyond assumptions of human rationality and that scientific and technological achievement and current instrumentalist views of education, particularly higher education, as simply a means of gaining personal financial advantage, are not sufficient.

We propose the ecoversity as a model of engagement to learn new understandings of ourselves and our relationships with non-human others and nature in its own terms and in ways that not only respect uniqueness and wonder but evolve new ways of putting these engagements into practice to ensure a contribution to the sustainability needs of the planet. The ecoversity concept points towards an as yet indistinct sustainable future, but does not pre-emptively exclude future hopes and future possibilities.

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