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Integrating education for sustainable development in learning development practice within a university humanities and social sciences faculty

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Presentation abstract

This talk focused on a Learning Development (LD) approach to the integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the production and delivery of self-directed and classroom LD resources within a department under a humanities and social sciences faculty. This was partly a response to a recently published framework for ESD in higher education (Advance HE, 2021) which encouraged students and staff, across disciplines and service areas, to identify their potential in advancing sustainability in their institutions and wider communities. ESD as 'a lens that permits us to look critically at how the world is and to envision how it might be and equips us to deliver that vision' implements and embeds pedagogies, enabling students to discern their roles in addressing 'integrity, social justice and economic prosperity' (Advance HE, 2021).

The role of universities in contributing to the United Nation's Global Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP, 2022) through research, teaching, skills development, and civic engagement, in positioning ESD strategically across the curriculum, and student expectations around ESD and SDG learning opportunities (SOS-UK, 2020) provided additional context for this session.

The talk included a succinct overview of ESD in higher education and, informed by the author's practice, a concise explanation of the distinctive role of LD in contributing to the integration of ESD within the formal and informal curricula. This was illustrated by presenting self-produced materials (or, reflecting participatory practice principles, co-produced with students or colleagues), based on a range of sustainability themes, and focusing on such skills areas as critical reflection, communication, collaborative learning

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and research. The observed impact on students from different subject areas, working collaboratively to apply academic skills to real-world challenges was addressed. Embedded high-impact ESD in LD fosters students' green literacy skills, enabling them, when they transition out of higher education, to build, and maintain environmentally and socially just communities and workplaces. A comprehensive resource document, with example material, will be hosted on Learn Higher.

Keywords: sustainability; green; embed.

Community response

The author discussed a Learning Development (LD) approach to integrating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the production and delivery of LD resources in a humanities department at the University of Portsmouth. The author reflected on a published framework (Advance HE, 2021), Education for Sustainable Development Guidance. Jointly published by QAA and Advance HE, this guidance provides a framework to help staff in UK Higher Education Institutions incorporate Education for Sustainable Development within their curricula. It has been produced by an expert group drawn from across the sector, with the aim of supporting students from any discipline to acquire the knowledge, understanding, and skills necessary to develop values and take actions to transition society towards sustainable futures.

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Image 1. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Image 1: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – are the world's shared plan to end extreme poverty, reduce inequality, and protect the planet by 2030 (United Nations, 2022).

The presenter discussed the distinctive role of LD in contributing to the integration of ESD within the formal and informal curricula in humanities subjects, which opened a dialogue about students linking UN SDGs with STEM subjects. The talk encouraged the attendees to develop new strategies to engage humanities students with UN SDGs.

> I have tried to embed some of UN SDGs in my past teaching for Humanities students and have received negative feedback. Students seemed to link UN SDGs with STEM subjects, Business and Management, or Law, and they were keen to avoid engaging with any of these disciplines. It was good to see that Humanities students could engage meaningfully with UN SDGs if given enough time and space. I'll try to negotiate with the Humanities college a new teaching strategy to give students the time and space they need to engage with UN SDGs fully.

The attendees considered adopting various strategies used by the author to enhance the curriculum and promote a sense of belonging. The study showed the impact of this work, such as emphasising the interconnected nature of social justice and the ecological crisis

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and encouraging consideration about how complex problems can be responded to by people working through and with nature.

> I found this a welcome space to reflect on my own practice and identify opportunities to consider incorporating elements of sustainability into it. I have used examples from this area before in my teaching, but not necessarily as an intentional act to acknowledge the students' connection with sustainable development and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). I was particularly interested to think about how students engage with these ideas, where the sustainability aspect could be a vehicle for the learning. As a result of the session, I am thinking further about the balance required for this, where these huge ideas can augment the learning and not become distracting.

The author's approach showcased the importance of interdisciplinary aspects of sustainability. The implemented strategies enhanced students' critical thinking skills and guided the educators to embed the UN SDGs.

> This was an interesting workshop as it revealed an unexpected approach to embedding United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) in learning development practice for the Humanities.

Author's reflection

I'm grateful for and encouraged by these observations. Implementing sustainability as a central pillar of education is gaining ground. Learning Development has, I believe, the potential not only to support this endeavour but to encourage and even empower students and colleagues to understand that they need not be bystanders to our climate and ecological emergency but that they can deliver climate justice as global citizens. Although the development of academic skills may be the main driver to our work, they can be learnt and taught in real-world contexts which are of interest to our students and urgent relevance to our world.

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I hope that in this brief session, I was able to demonstrate that within a department under a Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty, this is eminently possible. There are always connections to be made between students' subject areas, sustainability themes and learning development goals (for example, languages, cultural biodiversity loss, report planning, and writing). I hope that the colleague suggesting that students may associate sustainability with STEM subjects, Business or Law is encouraged by my experience at Portsmouth, where embedding climate and ecological themes into my practice has largely been well received by students and colleagues.

Acknowledgments

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Author details

Rhiannon Parry Thompson is a Learning Development Tutor in a Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty where she engages with students in curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular settings. Rhiannon established and for eight years ran an international students' book club. With two Portsmouth Learning Development colleagues, she organised a symposium on storytelling for Learning Developers and, for students, workshops involving the use of artifacts and stories to bring their research to life. Rhiannon's learning development practice includes embedding sustainability into materials production and teaching. Amongst her sustainability related research interests are the co-occurrence of linguistic, cultural and biodiversity loss and solutions.

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