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Developing competency to shape practice: third-space professionals and education for sustainable development

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Abstract

Within higher education institutions, commitments and approaches to education for sustainable development vary, and policies do not always filter down to pedagogical practice and the student learning experience. Third-space professionals such as educational and academic developers are well-placed to work with those engaged in teaching and the support of learning across all subject areas and schools, to develop key competences aligned with pedagogical interventions in the area of education for sustainable development. However, certain challenges exist, particularly third-space professionals' own need to develop such key competences, and limitations surrounding the time required to do so. This piece calls for more conversations on how such challenges can be overcome in order for third-space professionals to collaborate with and most effectively prepare higher education teachers to support education for sustainable development and best equip graduates with sustainable competences of their own.

Keywords: education for sustainable development; competency development; educational development; academic development; third-space professionals.

Introduction

In the face of increasing evidence of the detrimental impact of human action upon the biosphere, in 1975 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) called for 'nothing short of a new global ethic' (p.1), one that advocated for individual and societal behaviour and attitudes that would ensure a harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment. Central to the establishment of such a proposed ethic was educational reform, as while 'governments and policy-makers can

order changes, and new development approaches can begin to improve the world's condition […] all of these are no more than short-term solutions, unless the youth of the world receives a new kind of education' (UNESCO, 1975, p.2).

Since the 1970s, a focus on the role education at all levels can and should play in matters surrounding sustainability and the climate emergency has grown exponentially, coalescing into the by-now highly recognisable area of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and the often overlapping yet nuanced area of Education for Sustainability (EfS). Within the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) and its 17 sustainable development goals, education is positioned fourth. Yet while frequently at the forefront of higher education institutions' strategic initiatives, commitments to sustainability and implementation of education for sustainable development differ from one institution to another, and do not always filter down from policy to practice at the expense of the student experience and the graduate skillset. Valid questions still arise regarding how prepared higher education teachers and those who support learning are to support education for sustainable development (for example, Melén, Persson and Einarson, 2020), questions that third-space professionals such as educational and academic developers may be well positioned to address.

The need for training in education for sustainable development is widely acknowledged in the scholarly literature (Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2019; Bonilla-Jurado et al., 2024), yet few calls outline what this may look like, or specifically identify educational and academic developers as equipped for this task. In their 2024 review of the extant ESD literature, Bonilla-Jurado et al. advocate for the combined approach of 'inter-institutional collaboration' and 'proper faculty preparation' (2024, p.21), but the question remains as to who is best placed to prepare the latter for the task. As experts in the pedagogical and educational landscape, third-space professionals such as educational and academic developers can play a vital contribution in enhancing institutional commitments to education for sustainable development, and the effective practice of this area across all disciplines. By becoming experts in competency development for education for sustainable development, and collaborating with and shaping the practice of academic colleagues who teach, third-space professionals can and often do work towards addressing one of higher education's greatest responsibilities: the upskilling and empowerment of graduates to reflect upon and find ways to address societal actions and behaviours, including their own, that negatively impact our world.

This short piece is offered as a contribution to the extant literature that advocates for the importance of competency development, particularly when aligned with pedagogical innovation (Lozano et al., 2017), and further identifies and situates third-space professionals within this field. Acknowledging the challenges such professionals face, a call is made for more support and training so that educational and academic developers can best work with and support colleagues across all schools and subject areas in the delivery of education for sustainable development.

Collaboration and competency development

When working with and attempting to implement education for sustainable development, there is a need for the development and possession of 'key sustainability competences' (Scherak and Rieckmann, 2020, p.5; see also Lozano et al. (2017) for a review of competences in the extant ESD literature). Such capabilities, when expressly linked with sustainability, are often new for higher education teachers, who must possess knowledge of sustainable development that may sit beyond their own subject background (Persson, Einarson and Melén, 2023). Depending upon subject or disciplinary context, some teachers can struggle to align their field and existing area of expertise and practice with concepts and discussions surrounding sustainability, which, as Berchin, de Aguiar Dutra and de Andrade Guerra (2021) point out, evidences the need for continuous training and competency development in this field.

Alongside such knowledge, teachers and those who support learning must also possess pedagogical approaches and tools to delivering education for sustainable development and support student learning and sustainability literacy (Melén, Persson and Einarson, 2020; Scherak and Rieckmann, 2020). In turn, the goal is not simply to equip students with knowledge surrounding sustainability, but rather to provide them with the opportunity to develop the skills to 'improvise, adapt, innovate, and be creative' (Thomas, 2009, p.245). Given the critical role teachers play in supporting such learning, Qablan (2018) calls for consideration of what competences teachers require. Various useful competency frameworks exist, including the UNECE model (2012), the CSCT model (Sleurs, 2008), and the Erasmus+ project's 'A Rounder Sense of Purpose' model (see Scherak and Rieckmann, 2020), but successful implementation of these in practice requires developmental support.

Given their expertise in pedagogical practice and their liminal ability to span the academic spectrum through interdisciplinary collaboration with staff in all academic schools and subject areas, third-space professionals such as academic and educational developers are uniquely placed to utilise competency frameworks effectively in the support and shaping of colleagues' practice, which in turn can enhance student learning. Engagement with and exposure to education for sustainable development during their studies can enable students to develop problem-solving skills and improve academic engagement and performance (Bonilla-Jurado et al., 2024). Yet third-space professionals must themselves develop the competences needed to educate the educators (Melén, Persson and Einarson, 2020; Persson, Einarson and Melén, 2023), and this poses one of many challenges.

Challenges and recommendations

Akin to the situation for teachers within higher education, a challenge for third-space professionals in delivering support for education for sustainable development is that for many, and depending upon academic or professional background, they will be conveying knowledge and practice outwith their own area of expertise. This is not an unusual situation for educational and academic developers to find themselves in, given that they often deliver '"second-hand" educational knowledge, teaching and learning strategies', but it does have an impact on the extent to which they will be trusted and accepted as credible (Little and Green, 2020, p.805). While Persson, Einarson and Melén suggest that sustainable literacy 'gives an idea of the final goal and thus gives academic developers directions of where to aim in building course content' (2023, p.201), the development of key competences by academic and educational developers is crucial if education for sustainable development is to be effectively practised by their teaching colleagues. The focus is no longer on simply 'getting the message across', as emphasis instead is placed upon 'facilitating civic participation, deliberative learning and re-imagining future possibilities' (O'Donoghue, Taylor and Venter, 2018, p.114). After all, sustainable education should not, as Sterling (2004) emphasises, simply be bolted on to curricula and higher education structures. It is not, he continues, 'just another issue to be added to an overcrowded curriculum, but [rather is] a gateway to a different view of curriculum, of pedagogy, of organisational change, or policy and particularly of ethos' (Sterling, 2004,

p.50), or what Lozano et al. refer to as a ''Golden Thread' throughout the entire university system' (2013, p.10).

Emphasis within institutional approaches to education for sustainable development should thus include support for third-space professionals to develop their competences in this field, as they are best placed to work collaboratively with academic colleagues who teach and support learning, to enhance the pedagogical skills needed to embed sustainability effectively in their practice. Such development could take the form of aligning pedagogical approaches to what students should learn, think, and do (Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2019), with a focus on drawing upon expertise in the provision of learning that is 'interactive, experiential, transformative, and real-world' relevant (Lozano et al., 2017, p.2). Key to such development is time, as the development of education for sustainable development competences requires 'deeper learning processes', ones that cannot be obtained through brief engagements with the material (Scherak and Riechmann, 2020, p.13). This poses a second challenge for third-space professionals, who are often stretched already in what can be thankless and under-acknowledged work with academic partners in support of the latter's practice, and their professional and pedagogical development.

Yet where possible, more protracted opportunities for educational and academic developers to engage in education for sustainable development competency development should be identified and embraced. The journey towards acquiring such competences may not be short, but it can open up more opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration (Melén, Persson and Einarson, 2020) and communication. And in turn, the training and collaborative working relationships that third-space professionals can offer their colleagues who teach and support learning must be designed to implement a framework of competences. This cannot be achieved through ad hoc, added on, standalone, or one-off training sessions for staff colleagues, but rather should be built into the suite of support offered by educational developers. It is precisely the liminality of such professionals that affords them the opportunity to develop education for sustainable development competences across the spectrum of subjects within higher education, moving between and within Schools to enrich and develop knowledge, enhance pedagogical practice, and collaborate through interdisciplinary engagement on a subject that transcends disciplinary background.

Conclusion

Education for sustainable development remains a highly visible area within higher education, yet one that is inconsistently defined, addressed, and put into practice. Third-space professionals such as educational and academic developers are well positioned to work with staff colleagues who teach and support learning across the various academic subjects, and yet certain challenges remain. For one, to embed education for sustainable development effectively into practice, certain competences need to be established and developed, yet these are not always held by third-space professionals, who themselves require specific learning opportunities in order to support their teaching colleagues. Drawing upon existing frameworks, and working to identify key competences, are crucial first steps (see Lozano et al., 2017). Second, sufficient time is needed to develop these competences, time that third-space professionals do not always have. More conversations between key stakeholders (learners, teachers, educational and academic developers, and external parties) about how these challenges can be overcome are thus warranted.

By taking steps towards competency development, slow though the collective journey may be, third-space professionals can begin to respond to the urgent need to embed education for sustainable development at the practice level, and not just in academic subjects to which such sustainability issues more readily lend themselves, or as a bolt-on to existing curricula. Instead, through a commitment to competency development that in turn will lead to the competency development of teachers responsible for student learning, educational developers can move in the right direction towards ensuring that education for sustainable development does not end up just another higher education sound bite.

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