

Creating the Sustainable: How Can a Creative Writing Module Promote the Sustainability Agenda with the Purpose of Furnishing Undergraduates with Personal, Academic and Vocational Skills for Post-Degree Life?

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Abstract

Sustainability has become a buzzword in the Higher Education (HE) sector yet its translation into the arts and humanities remains under-explored. This paper will question the capacity of literary studies and creative writing to not only translate but engage with notions of sustainability through meaningful and responsive curricula developments, suggesting that promoting sustainable literacy has the potential to facilitate students with essential skills for post-university employment. By making links between writing courses, sustainability and academic development, the paper will provide a rationale for recognising modules that engage with concepts of sustainability as having the potential for significant impact on students' overall university experience. The paper will identify a model for best practice at the University of Brighton and offer feedback on staff and students' experiences.

1. Introduction

Promoting sustainability – the continued long-term use of a resource with minimal impact on the wider environment – affects the community, social system and economy. HE curricula, across all subjects, must seek to foster a responsible global citizenship, foregrounding the significance of personal and collective action. As evolving concepts, they are increasingly drawn upon to inform education policy and curricula design. Sustainability relates to social consciousness and an awareness of wider communities as well as how these networks can change our experiences of education.

This paper identifies an absence of explicit sustainable teaching and learning in the arts and humanities disciplines and argues that literary studies

and writing modules have the potential to encourage students to consider their role in a sustainable society and in doing so, provide students with explicit vocational, academic and personal development. We identify a model of good practice at the University of Brighton, where undergraduates now have the opportunity to examine the social responsibility of the writer through a series of workshops and seminars led by local writers, actors, comedians and politicians. Students on this module are expected to produce their own socially conscious creative piece and to reflect on the process. This paper reports on the students' experience of this module and suggests ways in which the module impacts on their development. We argue that HE needs to create learning environments for students that, 'develop self-efficacy, encourage risk taking in safe environments and help students engage in messy/complex processes in unpredictable situations which have no right or wrong answer' [1] in order to help students understand how their undergraduate studies might influence and help them in their sustainable careers, studies and lives post-university.

HE can play a vital role in creating and maintaining a sustainable society, not just for our own generation, but for generations to come. As institutions, universities educate future leaders and professionals who will go on to shape this society. All sectors of HE must acknowledge their responsibility in forming and empowering the knowledge and skills needed to achieve a sustainable society together. According to Sir Alan Langlands, HEFCE chief executive, Higher Education is 'uniquely placed to play a leading role' in helping the UK to meet its targets relating to sustainability [2]. In his role as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Lord Mandelson also underscores the need for similar developments, arguing that 'Universities can play a vital role in our economic recovery, especially in advancing a strategy for real and lasting change' [2].

The responsibility of education in promoting social change has underpinned government responses to the sustainability agenda. Between 1998 and 2003 the UK Government operated a 'Sustainable Development Education Panel' whose work was developed by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). DEFRA's sustainability mission statement asserts that the people and government of the United Kingdom 'need to make a decisive move toward more sustainable development. Not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because it is in our own long-term best interests. It offers the best hope for the future. Whether at school, in the home or at work, we all have a part to play. Our small everyday actions add up to make a big difference.' [3]

At a post-compulsory level, The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) committed the HE sector to environmental causes and a wide project of sustainability awareness across the sector. Organisations such as the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC) and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) sought to establish networks and collaborative projects with the aim of integrating sustainability broadly across institutions.

The government's Sustainable Development Strategy outlined in 2005 encouraged the HE sector to promote sustainable literacy as well as directing funding councils to require HE institutions to demonstrate sustainability across their spectrum of activities, including the curricula. Sustainable literacy fosters in students and academics the ability to make decisions in the context of wider social, economic and environmental considerations and to consider how they may act to influence others. Sustainability projects have sought to employ virtual spaces to promote and engage institutions across cyber-space, drawing together otherwise disparate HE communities. This has developed from established relationships such as the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP) to the Sustainability in Higher Education Network (SHED) and the online resources and networks created by the Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts (CSPA). Through these projects, the UK government hoped 'to harness the sector's commitment to sustainability' fuelled by a belief that since HE 'led this agenda from the beginning: we must see it through' [4].

Although many universities developed sustainability policies as a response to government recommendations, fewer enabled discourses of sustainability to permeate the curricula of the arts and humanities. In the context of wider curriculum developments, interdisciplinary approaches and innovative approaches within individual disciplines,

literature and literary studies remained under-represented and unexplored in debates regarding the incorporation of sustainability into HE teaching and learning. Recognizing the educational and social value of literature and literary studies, the authors of the module sought to address this absence.

2. Literature and sustainability

In April 2009 the HEA issued a call for projects designed to promote the relationship between literature and sustainability. In response to this call, Dr Katy Shaw, Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Jessica Moriarty, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, were awarded funding to author and deliver a second year undergraduate module called 'Writing and Social Consciousness' to Humanities students at the University of Brighton between October 2009 and January 2010. The module was written on the basis of a shared belief between the writers that it is necessary to develop a social consciousness in order to operate fully in a democratic society. The authors sought to create a module that would encourage students to see themselves not simply as individuals but as necessarily integrated members of a wider community and system of social relations.

Underpinning the module design was a belief that the very best literature can provoke, move and motivate and is therefore vital to the ongoing development of the sustainability agenda. In asking questions without definite answers, the module enabled students to ask what they are capable of as readers and writers today. Over the course of the semester, staff and students engaged with each other and with external literary practitioners at an emotional and intellectual level to nurture a supportive and safe environment in which critical thinking and creative responses could occur.

By engendering a sustainable attitude to the world beyond the university, education for sustainable development aims to illuminate sustainability as an inter-related and often mutually beneficial aspect of the curricula. The module foregrounded inter-dependence as strength, making students aware of the diversity around them and celebrating change and development as a result of their engagement in the workshops and discussions. Through raising awareness, encouraging action, engaging in reflection and making connections, students employed literature to explore some of the key principles of sustainability – ecology, social justice and grass roots movements.

The module also aimed to raise student awareness of employability issues through embedded course content and access to professionals and industry experience. In her own study of desirable graduate skills, Sarah Sayce concludes that sustainability

literacy is fast becoming a 'must have' for all graduates of the future [5]. During the module, students were made aware of how their experience of engaging with external experts such as novelists and speech writers would contribute to their future employability and that employers are seeking sustainability literate graduates who are sensitive to these contemporary concerns and debates. Creating networks of support to enable an emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches and connections, the HE sector must begin to design modules with the future in mind, realising the potential of existing networks and expanding graduate skills to meet the changing needs and expectations of a twenty-first century workforce.

Even with the proliferation of courses and modules in Higher Education (HE), there is still some debate about the benefit of teaching creative writing to undergraduate students. Most creative writing courses cannot claim to have nurtured Ian McEwan or Ali Smith as the prestigious writing department at the University of East Anglia can profess; in fact most students who study the craft of writing will not go on to notoriety, we will not find their work in Waterstone's, on the BBC or in the West End. The introduction of fees has led to some students questioning the value of their degrees and wondering how HE will enhance and enrich their chances of employment. Why then have writing courses managed to sustain large numbers of students and continued to thrive?

Whether it is e-mails, reports, letters, presentations or other professional documents, confidence in ones writing process is a necessary tool when entering employment. Supporting students' creativity is generally viewed as best achieved through a process-based approach to learning and teaching [6, 7, 8]. At undergraduate level in particular, the focus is on the student's experience of learning rather than the content or outcomes of learning. Biggs [9] proposes that creativity is best supported by approaches that improve students' ability to reflect on their ideas. Creativity can be effectively supported through teaching and learning strategies that encourage students to evolve as effective professionals. Planning, organising, self structuring, self monitoring and self reflection on their process and outputs can enhance their creative process and academic performance and the ability to reflect on one's work and evolve is valued in HE, but also in the workplace [10].

Employers are increasingly seeking to recruit staff that can think creatively and come up with sustainable and innovative ideas [10], but it is not clear if students are aware of how the creative skills they acquire at university can help them to gain employment [11]. Creative writing courses can help students to reconnect with or re-learn their creativity and find strategies for

enjoying the writing process [12]. Students on the social responsibility module understood that the course had enhanced their employability and vocational skills and could foresee how this might help them with their existing studies and also with their careers after university.

By encouraging an interdisciplinary focus on issues surrounding the sustainability agenda as well helping students develop confidence in writing, research and presentation skills through individual and collaborative work, the module aimed to encourage students to develop a raised awareness and critical understanding of the social world, recognition of themselves as active agents and an appreciation of a corresponding sense of social responsibility. Enabling professional and academic specific specialists (including actors, writers, politicians and comedians) to work with students from a range of humanities disciplines the module encouraged students to consider such issues as ways in which literature can contribute to and promote sustainable communities, how writers can understand the need for the appropriate and applicable treatment of social issues in literature and how literature can be influenced by the environment and social awareness.

Through contact time students were encouraged to consider how they respond or contribute to social groups and to reflect on their own political agency as a writer and reader. As the module developed, students began to broaden this discussion into wider perspectives on the role of the arts in promoting social consciousness in contemporary society. Sessions necessitated both critical and creative engagement with a range of writings. Involving independent as well as collaborative inquiry based learning, contact time ranged from lectures and seminars, workshops and seminars with guest speakers, writing workshops, group presentation and tutorials. Outside the classroom, students were expected to post their creative work on a blog, situated online at the University's intranet *Studentcentral*, to comment on each other's work and give constructive feedback. This formed the basis of a reflection as part of the assessment. Reading for each week was sourced in a student handbook that was made available online (for environmentally friendly reasons).

In designing the module, the authors sought to develop an established historical partnership at the University of Brighton between literature and the community, as well as to confirm their own existing networks with local writers' groups and the local community presses QueenSpark Books and Waterloo Press. QueenSpark Books are a local community publisher with extensive experience gained over 36 years. Their work has received wide recognition which has earned them financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Their publications focus on narratives

that might otherwise remain silenced and includes collections of creative writing as well as local community histories. QueenSpark are the University's official printing partner and this mutually beneficial relationship has allowed our students' literature to grow and develop in partnership with that of local communities. Waterloo Press is a small local press established to provide platforms for new writers. The press has established a strong catalogue of poetry and prose and is committed to promoting the work of local writers. As a result of working with these community organisations and in discussing issues of social consciousness and sustainability the authors were inspired to design an undergraduate module that would develop these existing strengths and actively involve students in ongoing debates about the relationship between literature and sustainability.

In breaking down perceived boundaries between the "town and gown" the module facilitated active community participation and encouraged a permeable approach to student involvement with the local environment. In doing so the module leaders hoped that the university and community would come to embrace one another and that the students would be encouraged to learn through the local landscape. Through these networks and integration the module aimed to draw students (and staff) away from academic boundaries and the boundaries around academia in the community. A multi-faceted approach to sustainability encouraged networking with local community arts organisations, promoting economically and ecologically sustainable and social engagement as well as artistic excellence, with this comprehensive synthesis developing key partnerships and building sustainable practice. Students developed the ability to adapt to new circumstances, to interrogate key terms and ongoing debates and work towards a culture of sustainability. Facilitating exchanges and opening opportunities for collaboration, students engaged in classroom and community work, forging partnerships to support local community groups and receiving reciprocal support for the module and the integration of students into the local literary scene as a result.

An interdisciplinary (Creative Writing and Literature) teaching team worked with external experts to offer innovative experiences of the topics under discussion. Collaborating with local practitioners students drew on their local community to make links between their learning at university and the world beyond. Working with the local short story collective Short Fuse, students engaged in a creative writing workshop concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. After this event, students were offered an exclusive opportunity to enter their creations into the Short Fuse local writing competition with the winner appearing at their monthly event at

local community arts venue, Komedia, in December 2010. Engaging in a workshop with local comedy writer Jill Edwards, students thought about promoting social consciousness, performed their work and presented their agendas to the outside world. Combining work in literature with the real world of publishing and commissioning, Jill encouraged students to articulate their beliefs to a diverse range of audiences. While working on Anthony Cartwright's latest novel *Heartland*, students considered how literature can help us to understand why a community might turn to the politics of the extreme right in times of political and social transition while local crime writer Peter James joined students for a session on novel writing. He answered some questions about his work, his role in the promotion of the social consciousness of crime, the impact of crime on the community and why the Brighton community forms the backdrop to much of his work.

3. Methods

At the beginning of the module students were asked to sign a consent form saying that they agreed to take part in the research and were happy for their comments to be used in presentations and publications, while the authors would attempt to ensure their anonymity, this could not be guaranteed. At the end of the module, students were asked to take part in a focus group so that we could gain insight into their experience of the module and evaluate the impact of a heightened awareness of sustainable living on their personal, academic and vocational development.

A concern with focus groups is often that participants may not want to divulge personal information in front of strangers [13] but because the group had got to know each other over the course of the module and engaged in workshops and feedback sessions that meant they had to work closely with one another. The module leaders hoped that in bringing them together to discuss their shared and personal experiences that they might prompt each others' memories and that individual members might offer insights that the rest of the group had not considered.

In an ideal scenario, a focus group will consist of six or more people [13, 14], and the ten students who volunteered to take part were able to engage with questions without feeling over-exposed or vulnerable. Using a focus group meant that we were able to capture the experiences of more students than would have been possible on an individual basis as workloads and external pressures made arranging convenient times for interviews problematic. Feedback from the focus group suggests that:

1. The workshop environment was effective in raising students' awareness about sustainable living and of their ongoing personal development, and it enabled them to identify the skills *they were acquiring in HE and how these might relate to their post-degree ambitions*. One student commented: *'my writing style, initially, was very ornate and over-the-top, but now I find I'm trying to make it more succinct, concise, but whilst maintaining my personal kind of experience on it by writing about something I'm passionate about.'* (Val)
2. The students benefit from participating in creative workshops led by local writers, actors, politicians and comedians: *'I just want to do creative writing. I enjoy it far more than my other subjects, so I think I might try and do that. I like it because it's actually given me a reason, this lesson [to write],'* (Ali); *'It's given us direct examples from the industry. It shows that it's attainable if you work hard enough.'* (Tim)
3. Students benefited from the opportunity to discuss their world view and writing process with their peers and tutor. These sessions provided opportunities for the students to identify their own processes and to consider how they were developing as practitioners and learners: *'I found the feedback process horrifying – you comment every week how scared I looked [...]. And that stopped a couple of weeks ago but [...] I found it really good. I mean, I've stopped shaking when I read my stuff out loud, so I'm really glad I took this module because now I'm not so terrified of reading out my work out loud.'* (Jane); *'I think the pressure that we have to read our work and get feedback has been really good because I would never have shown my work otherwise. So I think it's easier every time you do it – it makes it that bit easier.'* (Roiseen)
4. The students' experience of the writer/actor/comedian/politician-led workshops was both enjoyable and beneficial, with students welcoming the opportunity to discuss and debate their writing in an informal setting, outside their normal learning environment. This enabled them to see the value of their discipline in the world and their own value within their discipline:

Tutor: So it's something about applying what you're learning to the real world?

Group: Yes

Tutor: Do you think you would've got that without the guest speakers?

Abi: No.

Tutor: From your other modules, do you think you've had that awareness from other modules?

Group: No. Not at all.

5. The module helped students to articulate their learning in more depth and with more confidence than in other modules. This in turn supported their development as undergraduate researchers and helped them to use the experiences they had gathered outside HE to enrich their creative writing without feeling vulnerable or exposed: *'I'm really excited about coming in [to the lecture] and reading it out and getting feedback [and] just to get, like, recognition for your work.'* (Ali)
6. Students' creativity is clearly nurtured by constructive feedback and encouragement from tutors, guest speakers and peers: *'I think the opportunity of being able to read our writing out loud and get feedback is like really rewarding because when I'm at home reading out my writing I'm just told to shut up. Well, it's not quite like that, basically they can't be bothered.'* (Jane)
7. Students' creativity is supported by a process through which they can follow their ideas and motivations as they develop their creative approaches. Central to this is the ability to reflect on and to discuss and debate the processes at work in their creative writing. This capacity needs to be supported by a process that provides students with opportunities to discuss and develop their ideas and these opportunities are possibly more beneficial when outside the traditional context of the classroom.
8. In focusing on sustainable living, workshops helped the students to consider their place in the world and how their teaching and learning experiences might help them evolve as learners and people: *'I think that if anyone really looks at the world we live in and the situation the world is in and our species is in, they are angry [...] and if we don't have the sort of ways of exorcising our anger or discontent with things through writing, or through the media that surrounds us [...] then*

the alternative is you just become a bitter and distant person. So, if at the very least you're not trying to change the world, at least you're selfishly doing it for yourself to feel better about it.' (James)

This study suggests that incorporating concepts and understanding of sustainability into literary studies and creative writing can function as a means of effectively linking academic achievement and vocational ambition. By focusing on a sustainable life, literacy and society, an opportunity was produced for HE to support students in the development of their personal, vocational and academic development through the delivery of writing sessions. This module offers a model of best practice because:

- a) It provided opportunities for students to engage in intensive reflective practice on an individual basis and in groups that helped them to make links between creative processes, research enabled learning practices, meta-cognition, learning outcomes and personal, vocational and academic aspirations. When students' academic and creative work is developing through reflective practice, so is their ability to be critically self aware, to understand the inspirations driving their work and to provide opportunities for them to articulate their learning and creative processes. These are all factors that can help to develop confidence in personal and professional life: *'It's about being passionate as well, though. Like, what really drives people – what do you want to do ... I actually want to become a publisher after this so it has made me more aware of what's going on.'* (Jane)
- b) Workshops were facilitated in neutral safe spaces away from the traditional classroom.
- c) The module was collaborative and brought together students with professionals from the "real" world.
- d) The module promoted an idea of creative writing students as researchers – providing opportunities for students to articulate and to present ideas to others: *'I've really enjoyed listening to other people, what everyone else feels passionate about, because, just because you get a massive insight on all these different issues that maybe you don't consider until*

someone stands up and says something about it.' (Ali)

- e) The module engaged the students in the local community, an academic community, and also helped them to consider their role as global citizens, engendering a sustainable attitude to life beyond university: *'In terms of embarking on creative projects, this module has kind of really hammered home how important it can be to be socially responsible, and to write about a relevant issue rather than just writing for the sake of profit.'* (Oscar)

5. Conclusion

Outputs from the module included an anthology of poetry looking at mental health issues, a film script set in post-apocalyptic Brighton, a short story about female sterilisation in order to curb population expansion and a dramatic monologue exploring the effects of Capitalism. The feedback from the focus group and students' assessed reflective commentaries suggests that the students clearly understood the benefits of discussing socially responsible writing and their own potential impact on a sustainable future. They learned how this might be achieved through their writing, but also through their work and lives post-university study. Enabling and empowering students to consider how they might make meaningful changes in the world contributes not only to their university experience but to a more hopeful future for us all.

In this example, incorporating sustainability into HE modules become not merely a luxury but a vibrant and dynamic space for students and staff to consider social responsibility and sustainable literacy, a concept that the authors would like to see more widely integrated in arts and humanities curricula across the HE Academy. Writing and literacy in sustainability are shown here to inspire action and engagement in issues surrounding the sustainability agenda and to enable students to have a sense of themselves as active agents of change.

In HE, undergraduate students face increasingly complex choices and decisions about how to construct meaning in their lives [15]. This shift has caused Baxter Magolda [16] to argue that 'the central goal of higher education is to promote the internal capacity in students to choose their own beliefs, values, identity and relationships.' The challenge for lecturers is to facilitate learning environments and teaching and learning methods that will help students to develop confidence and skills to articulate their creativity and the criteria that underpin it [10]. In doing so, we can help students identify the vocational skills they are

acquiring on their undergraduate degree programmes that will help them to gain employment and also to feel confident and empowered by a sense of who they are and their place in the world.

Although the approach to learning that sustainability advocates has been widely embraced by HE, it has yet to find a convincing way of engaging staff and students with its agenda in the arts and humanities. This paper believes that literature and creative writing modules have the potential to provide a solution to this problem and suggest that more work is done to identify pathways between sustainable teaching and learning and humanities and writing modules, with a view to enhancing not only the HE agenda but also the world beyond the classroom.

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