

## The Role of Educator Training for a Sustainable Future

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A large number of documents regarding the role of higher education in the creation of a sustainable civil society were written during the last 50 years within the framework of international and world conferences: Talloires (1990), Halifax (1991), Rio de Janeiro (1992), Swansea (1993) and so on.

Literature is also integrated by a high number of good practices developed in a series of universities around the world. These chose the challenge of sustainability as one of the main objectives to be pursued in the short, medium and long term. At the same time, universities, colleges, research institutes and agencies are creating networks, computing platforms and partnerships in order to exchange experiences, share achieved results and improve opportunities for cooperation and research (SALOMONE, 2013).

Higher education has one across-the-board objective when taking the sustainability challenge, that is educate and train all future teachers, decision makers, students, professionals, experts, company employees and common people to embrace sustainable and environment-aware approaches, behaviors, lifestyles and consumption patterns. The world of higher education shall commit especially to creating environmental basic teaching processes and promoting practices related to environment ethics.

### **The importance of changes in Higher Education**

All the important documents issued at international level, highlighted that, in order to contribute to sustainable development, higher education has to transform. This transformation entails a change in the training paradigm that is a change in the responsibilities of institutions, curricula guidelines and training processes, so that they can respond better to the needs and requirements of present and future generations. This transformation also implies changes in university structure and governance: those who work in universities need to have a vision of higher education that is aligned with the principles of sustainable development. The latter has to be

directly applied at local level through the shared values at the basis of academia.

Knowledge structures need to change as well. These have to be modified to guarantee an integrated approach to sustainable development: this will allow students in higher education to take the challenges of this complex issue with an holistic approach, going beyond the traditional views on knowledge and links it to cooperative building, planning, and production of knowledge. The transformation has to promote respect and understanding of different cultures and welcome their contributions.

### **Effective training for educators and teachers**

Sustainability training rises to a crucial role in training of future educators and teachers. Educating is an extremely complex task, it includes: skills, ability to ponder and criticize, teaching, training, understanding and planning, communicating and the ability to be a guide for those in training. Educators are very special professionals, they promote empowerment and freedom, they have the task to develop the potential of the person-in-education, as this job is both art and science at the same time.

Being an educator is not just performing a job that involves only a number of tasks: it means operating inside the "education" system, which is not completely codified and never will be (Santelli Beccegato, 2001). This essay specifically analyses the figure of the environmental educator; a professional educator who has the task to offer sustainable patterns to civil society and students, building teaching contents for schools, also cooperating with teachers.

The environmental educator is a professional twice as special, as holds competences and contents belonging to different sectors, has to create and maintain links among them, has diversified and adjustable communication methods, teaching skills and organising and managing abilities.

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The environmental educator cannot simply pass on knowledge and contents, but has to constantly elaborate them critically, creating interest, in order to produce ever-new knowledge and culture. In this way, students can stretch their horizons more and more.

The environmental educator is a professional who is endowed with a critical spirit, and in time develops a number of skills, such as:

- Having an ecosystem view of reality and knowledge, that allows him/her to grasp connections and interdependence links between old and new information;
- Being able to combine the contribution of knowledge deriving from different subjects, each one keeping its own perspective, in a complex system;
- Being aware of the responsibility as an individual and as part of civil society, so that when educating he/she is guided by ethics. As a consequence, the educator is aware of the importance of teaching and living the values of solidarity, sharing, cooperation, equal opportunities.

### **The contribution of UNECE: Environmental Educators' competences**

At European level, UNECE (2012) highlighted the figure of the environmental educator defining some crucial competences. These shall not be considered as a minimum standard or a starting point for all environmental educators, but a target to aim to: they are the best way to maximise the professional development of environmental educators, and can be divided into four categories, as defined by the UNESCO Report *Learning: The Treasure within* (Delors, 1996):

- "Learning to learn" refers to the need for civil society to learn and understand the challenges to be taken (both at global and local level), as well as the potential role of educators and students may play in meeting these challenges;
- "Learning to do" looks at developing practical skills relating to education for sustainable development;
- "Learning to live and work together" highlights the need to develop cooperation and understanding the importance of

interdependence, pluralism, mutual understanding and peace;

- "Learning to be" deals with developing personal approaches and the ability to act with greater autonomy, ability to judge and personal responsibility for sustainable development.

Development and application of these competences by environmental educators depend on the possibility of starting a real empowerment process: it is crucial that the politicians, at all levels, support and train environmental educators so that these can understand the importance of their role in the building of a sustainable society. Moreover, it is fundamental that these extremely important educating figures are recognised and supported to their full potential and are put in a position to fulfil their potential through the development and the application of their competences.

### **Hypothesis of Environmental Educators' curriculum**

Taking into account all said so far, when identifying the main features for training projects tailored to environmental educators, the results of the investigation (Calvano, 2015), suggest for a training syllabus based on modules. This is because suitably organised module units achieve not only the sought goals in terms of learning and skills development, but also allow for the promotion of actions in close cooperation with each region, its agencies and institutions. The modular structure is not organised by subject, but around themes:

- Sustainability Sciences,
- Green Economy,
- Waste, reuse, resource,
- Territory planning and protect area management,
- Food, food safety and lifestyles,
- Environmental laws and human rights,
- Environment and cultural heritage: management, improvement and promotion,
- Population, migration and globalisation,
- Education and participating democracy,
- Perception and environment: the role of media and communication.

Contemporary pedagogical research, with its issues and discoveries, its intuition and analysis, its commitment to transforming itself into education, cooperates to challenge dangerous simplifications and support the need to look at life in all its

complexity, pursuing the development of knowledge and responsible commitment when acting in order to achieve a mutual and vital strengthening.

We are all living in an era with no illusions, we are all aware that chaos will stay despite all our efforts and knowledge, and that the modest orders and 'systems' governing the world are fragile (Bauman, 1996), education is an action of uncertain outcomes: such awareness however, shall not prevent us from working to improve opportunities so that the lives of people, society and all live beings becomes worthy of being lived.

Education to sustainability, a crossroads of education, political, economic, social and ethical commitments can help us to identify which should be our personal commitment in order to safeguard and dignify every single life form.

The hope, at the conclusion of this research and bearing in mind the results reached, is to be able to promote, whether directly or indirectly, a dialogue among all the social stakeholders involved in the training of environmental educators. This is a call for politicians, academia, institutions and civil society to take on an important, real and participated commitment to the creation of a new world, more fair and liveable or just "cleaner", as well as the possibility of having a future. The real existence of which is not at all guaranteed in this era.

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