Sustainable teaching:
Case studies at RMIT University
October 2010

Jo Lang, PhD.
Senior Lecturer, School of Education

I work in higher education in teacher education, specifically in professional education studies and humanities and sciences teaching methods.

My PhD. looked at the professional learning of pre-service teachers. I currently undertake research in the areas of sustainability education and professional learning (learning and teaching).

My recent research includes the implementation of education for sustainable development (EfSD) in schools.

I use the terms ‘sustainable development’ or ‘sustainability’ interchangeably. For me, sustainable development is the four pillars: environmental development, economic development, social development and cultural development.

The environment contextualises everything. The social, the economic and the cultural, political and spiritual dimensions intertwine with the environment to form a whole system. I once prioritised the environment, but now equally privilege the four pillars.

I see sustainability education and professional education as intertwined, as Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD). My view of EfSD integrates the multiple paradigms with the humanities and the sciences as well. Often EfSD has focused on the content and knowledge of sustainability but neglected the teaching and learning aspects. I focus on the learning processes of EfSD as this has often been missing from EfSD.

In my experience, students are interested in sustainability, but ask “How do I do it, because it is so hard?” I provide examples to help students see the possibilities. My approach to supporting learning is influenced by the constructivist approach (encouraging meaning-making) and this influences my approaches to teaching sustainability. I help them create their own constructions of sustainability. I help them to see that the connections between the pillars are even more important than the pillars themselves. This is where the complexity kicks in.

Beginning to learn about sustainability you quickly see the complexity of it. It is almost overwhelming. Then you spend time unpacking it as you become more expert. Then these things come back together in a complex form, but it is sitting more comfortably with you. For example, my environmental education elective students are primarily 21 year olds. About one third are deeply committed to sustainability, but the remaining two thirds, whilst they have some commitment to sustainability, they still love to shop. For this majority, I can’t start with the environment; it just doesn’t resonate with them.
The environmental perspective is not relevant to people outside the environmental area because people come from an urban environment where the natural environment is often hidden. Therefore, for them to connect with the environment, you have to start wherever they are. They need to see the interconnectedness of this concept, sustainability, and then they will come to see the relevance of the environment. By leading people to see the system as a whole, or the broader perspectives of sustainability, opens up the discussion to more people. In my courses students will change but it might be minute, so I have to be patient.

Society has disconnected the environment from the social. Sustainability allows us to rebuild the connections. I aim for reconnection, re-engagement and improvement by redeveloping. Reflective practice has to come into it. By thinking, students can be mindful of the consequences of their actions. Sustainability is not about “I”, it is about community. It is linked to professional learning and social learning. Learning in a community context is a natural instinct. In the community this approach to EfSD is more aligned and likely to work more quickly. Peer group learning deepens students’ understanding. Through the community we hear multiple voices. It impacts on us. This creates more of a critical space and it creates a willingness to listen. This is needed for change and learning. We need to be building capacity to listen by creating safe spaces and willingness to engage.

In teaching, everyone sees EfSD as on the side, a secondary issue. It needs to become mainstream, a core part of any curriculum. Those of us working in EfSD are always having to be the change agent, and it can be hard. We have to keep looking for opportunities to get-in, to start working with others who do not see it as a priority. Our challenge then is real change where everyone truly understands sustainability and has it embedded into the curriculum and their learning and teaching. The curriculum is overcrowded. Sustainable development is interdisciplinary, yet no-one wants to make space. So teachers need to understand the concept of sustainability and then how another program can help them embed sustainability into their curricula.

Universities see themselves as leaders in sustainable development. For example, greening the grounds and greening practices; we do it well and we'll do more. We can refine and increase efforts to reduce our ecological footprint. This requires a systems approach. What keeps me working in sustainability is the idea of wanting to make a difference – for the community to survive we need harmony with the natural environment. My approach is for single little steps of improvement.