Sustainable teaching:
Case studies at RMIT University
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I first studied to be a biologist, with a Bachelor of Science in Biology and majored in Ecology in the Philippines. I then did a Masters in Environmental Science in Australia, followed by a PhD.

In the Philippines I worked as a community environmental educator which brought me into contact with other environmental educators in the country and in the Asia-Pacific region. Working in the field, I came to see and experience environmental education within the context of the needs of local communities particularly at the grassroots level in a developing world context. It was this work at both the local and regional levels that led me to the field of international and community development. I then undertook my PhD in Australia that looked into my own experience of developing a grassroots environmental education curriculum in the Philippines.

The International Studies Program at RMIT emphasizes the value of developing in our students an interdisciplinary understanding of global events through practice-based learning; it has provided me a home for my interest in the global and in the practical. I was the Program Director for the International Studies undergraduate program at RMIT from 2005-2009.

I am currently involved in a number of research projects. The first looks at global citizenship and youth led learning, in partnership with an international non-government organisation. I am also researching school and community learning partnerships for sustainability.

There has been a journey for me in relation to my definition of the term sustainable development. My original understanding of sustainable development was consistent with the Brundtland Report’s definition:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."


However, it then shifted for me, to where I saw the term sustainable development as contested, environmentalists focused on ‘sustainable’ and the economists focused on ‘development’. It moved again for me to where I saw it as needing a localised definition, one that was about the people I worked with at the grassroots, where they developed and owned their own contextualised understanding of the term.
I have since revised my definition again, to where I now see it as the framework which takes a long term view. A framework which can deal with problems as they arise, but does so in a way that is consistent with a long term view. For instance, it is not enough to advocate for the decommissioning of nuclear power plants (as was the experience in the Philippines in the early 1980s) without having an overall, long term energy management plan. So my definition has become more enriched over time, to where it is about local action, with a global perspective and deals with immediate issues with a view to the long term.

Such a view of sustainable development is not discrete and this can make it difficult for others to work with such a definition. So for me, it is important to tell my story to explain how I have reached this point and to acknowledge that it is evolving; and to allow others to develop their own definitions for sustainable development.

In high school I had a transformative experience where my English teacher gave me the task of interviewing street sweepers in Manila and I wrote about what I found out about their lives in a play that was performed. I had had a middle class and protected upbringing, but these new experiences and perspectives opened a door for me to a network of individuals and groups that were involved in the anti-Marcos struggle. I managed to sustain this throughout my university days where as a student leader I had a strong commitment to working with the students but also with local communities. I got involved in student activism which in the Philippines at the time was very challenging – I became “moulded by the fight”. This passion and commitment influenced my decision to combine my interests in writing, in theatre, in teaching and in environmental science through an opportunity to develop a grassroots environmental education program for an NGO in Manila.

Sustainability is the framework that informs my research and teaching, but I don’t need to label it that way – it is a holistic approach. In my teaching and professional life I want to give students the tools of reflective practice and hopefully in their own journeys they will stumble on the words that will help them name the idea. Whilst an interdisciplinary perspective, I would argue, is a key to sustainable development, the expertise of being interdisciplinary is not always valued. Sustainability sits in an interdisciplinary space, yet the structures and the processes in higher education are still very discipline-based.

In my current teaching I am not able to teach directly about sustainability, but strongly practice the principles and processes consistent with Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD). We encourage students to develop the tools of reflection so they can reach their own conclusions. It is not possible to teach values. We facilitate them coming into their own. Higher education should give every student a basic understanding of the framework of sustainable development and how their discipline contributes to or can contribute to achieving this vision. There needs to be not just curriculum change, but if this change is to become long-term and make an impact into society, professional development of the current lecturers needs to be provided to support such a change.

At the operational level, higher education institutions need to actively engage in reducing, reusing and recycling in terms resource consumption coupled with making a commitment to industry and community partnerships. Professionally we need to encourage mutual responsibility with stakeholders. So rather than setting up networks, we need to have partnerships where stakeholders are aware of and concerned for the needs of others.