Community Sustainability and Lifelong Learning:  
Two Sides of Our Future Well-Being

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Abstract: The sustainability of both rural and urban communities is severely challenged by the impacts of corporate globalization. Lifelong learning, if built on the same foundational dimensions as a critical understanding of sustainability, can help to counter these impacts and contribute to individual and community well-being, not the corporate well-being of the quarterly report.

Introduction

Community sustainability, in the global and local context, is a powerful issue in this age of globalization. Both communities of place and communities across space are, in different ways, increasingly susceptible to the impacts of the global market, with its ethic of money values over life values (McMurtry, 1998). Their fragile sustainability is challenged by a consumerist corporate culture that brooks no barriers to its spread and legitimacy, demands preferential treatment around the world and dictates that any form of education that does not serve the global market has no place in its new world order. This paper will concentrate on communities of place, exploring the issue of their sustainability and the role that lifelong learning can play in this fundamental aspect of survival.

 Communities of place face almost overwhelming challenges to their sustainability in this age of corporate globalization. Transnational corporations impose their agenda on both rural and urban communities by means of policies that seek to lower corporate taxes and accommodate international flows of speculative capital, policies that seek to reduce public expenditures and privatise public services, and policies that seek to deregulate business and secure monopoly private property rights under law (The Globalism Project, 2001). Such policy initiatives not only impose a system of corporate rights on all aspects of our lives, but also work to forbid or supercede any policy initiatives that protect local, national, environmental, human, civil, labour or community rights. In other words, any policy that stands in the way of maximizing revenues for stockholders and top-level corporate executives is attacked and overturned. Protectionism has become a pariah term, while globalization has become a glossy expression that transnational corporations hide behind to do their dirty work.

The “casino capitalism” that characterizes corporate globalization increasingly casts both people and communities as losers in the now-famous “race to the bottom.” Such exclusion undermines urban and rural communities, leaving them vulnerable to fragmentation and collapse (Sumner, 2000), and compromising their ability to learn their way out of unsustainable situations.

As the process by which individuals continue to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes over their learning lifetimes (Moreland and Lovett, 1997), lifelong learning is a familiar term in education circles, so much so that it is little more than a catch-phrase within the conventional discourse on education (Collins, 1997). Flabby with overuse and stretched to encompass a myriad of meanings, lifelong learning has lost much of its original direction and
In addition, Holford (1997) contends that Western enthusiasm for lifelong learning is
underpinned by assertions that increasing globalization of markets threatens national economic
performance, even survival. He quotes a British report, which claims that a “culture of lifetime
learning is crucial to sustaining ... international competitiveness” (p. 154). This view is echoed by
Wilson (1999), who argues that

the rhetoric of lifelong learning is now often aligned with various national
economic efforts to enhance global competitiveness by drawing upon the
‘resource’ of ‘flexible’ or ‘sculpted’ workforces (p. 84).
Instead of contributing to open-ended exploration and greater awareness, lifelong learning has
been harnessed to the needs of the global market, further corrupting its original intent. Lifelong
learning now seduces people into becoming lifetime customers of pre-packaged learning products
for sale in the global educational supermarkets that are already forming.
All in all, the forces of corporate globalization threaten to overwhelm both communities of
place and lifelong learning, tying them to its market agenda that sees everyone and everything as a
potential profit source. Faced with this problem, lifelong learning calls for educators to align
themselves with the practical day-to-day interests of ordinary people (Collins, 1997). Such an
alignment can help people challenge the forces of corporate globalization and enhance the
communities they live in. Although the prime mover of recent lifelong learning policies
internationally has been economic, Holford (1997) contends that cultural, social and political
dimensions should also be significant. To this list, Orr (1992) would add the ecological
dimension, noting that the ecological crisis represents, in large measure, a failure of education.
All of these dimensions are essential parts of a lifelong learning for sustainability, one that can be
part of community survival. How can this be accomplished?

**A Framework for Looking at Community Sustainability and Lifelong Learning**

Community sustainability and lifelong learning are complex, layered issues that are
difficult to understand. However, given the impacts of corporate globalization on both
communities and lifelong learning, we must begin to engage with these issues on many levels.

**Community Sustainability**

Sustainability can be understood as *the process of constructing and protecting the civil commons.*
The civil commons is

`society’s organized and community-funded capacity of universally accessible
resources to provide for the life preservation and growth of society’s members
and their environmental life-host.` The civil commons is, in other words, what
people ensure together as a society to protect and further life, as distinct from

Universal healthcare, public education, national parks, old age pensions and sewage systems are
just some examples of the “conscious and co-operative human agency” (McMurtry 1999, 205) of the civil commons.

Conceptualizing sustainability as the process of constructing and protecting the civil commons is based on three building blocks: counter-hegemony, dialogue and life values. **Counter-hegemony** is a term used by Antonio Gramsci (1971) to denote the dialectical opposite of his seminal contribution to critical thinking - hegemony. Adult educator Peter Mayo (1999) understands hegemony as a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of dominant groups. Counter-hegemony can be seen as challenging these dominant groups by the withdrawal of the ‘spontaneous consent’ that undergirds hegemony.

**Dialogue** has gained new importance with the introduction of Jürgen Habermas’ (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action. Dialogue based on communicative rationality is the basis of the two-way (or more) communication that can become an alternative to the top-down, one-way monologue promulgated by the “experts” of corporate globalization. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), communicative action contains the possibility of dialogue aiming to arrive at mutual understanding and agreement. Such dialogue can “scrutinize existing dominance conditions so that well-founded positions can be achieved in ethical and political matters” (123).

**Life values** have been brought to prominence by John McMurtry (1998) in his conceptualization of the life-code of value and the money-code of value. While in the latter, money is the “regulating objective of thought and action” (p. 299), in the former, life is the regulating objective. Decisions and actions made from the perspective of the life-code of value reproduce or increase the means of life - such as clean air, food and water - that preserve or extend life itself, defined by McMurtry as “organic movement, sentience and feeling, and thought” (p. 298).

Choosing for life values can counter the money values that drive corporate globalization, exposing their limitations, especially with respect to their inability to recognize the importance of human and planetary life, except insofar as they can be used to maximize corporate profits.

These three building blocks - counter-hegemony, dialogue and life values - form the foundation of a critical understanding of sustainability as the process of constructing and protecting the civil commons. The outcome of this process of sustainability is increased well-being. This critical understanding of sustainability allies with the co-operative human construct of the civil commons, and adds a processual aspect that involves learning, evolves through negotiation, adapts to change, builds resilience, depends on feedback and thrives in participatory democracy. A dynamic process that is counter-hegemonic, dialogical and based in life values, this critical understanding of sustainability can challenge the hegemonic, monological, money-values foundation of corporate globalization, allowing communities to participate in their own sustainability through their construction and protection of the civil commons.

**Lifelong Learning and Sustainability**

In many ways, lifelong learning is at the heart of sustainability, when we understand sustainability as the process of constructing and protecting the civil commons. Hall (2000) explains the importance of learning itself:

At its most basic, learning is the process by which we make sense or give meaning to our experiences. Learning is the name given to the most creative of human
activities, becoming conscious of our movements through life and the movements of others and other processes. In short, our ability to survive, resist or prosper depends on our collective capacities to learn and upon our finding ways to share that learning with each other (p. 27).

In the face of the impacts of corporate globalization, our ability to survive, resist or prosper depends on our collective capacities to learn our way out of our current unsustainable state. Constructing and protecting the civil commons provides a perfect opportunity for sharing that learning with each other, so we can survive the age of globalization, resist the hegemony of corporate values and prosper through building a collective life-oriented alternative.

While learning is crucial to the sustainability project, it is often neither recognized as important nor seen to be even happening. When examining the interactive processes in a rural community, Falk and Kilpatrick (2000, p. 97) “were struck by the fact that a great deal of learning was occurring, yet it went largely unrecognized.” Such lack of recognition must be overcome if we are to place learning at the heart of the sustainability project. Following Serrano (2000, p. 93-4), we need to understand that “every social encounter anywhere, at any level or arena, is an opportunity for learning.” Learning must become a way of life if we are to learn our way out.

Learning is at the heart of the sustainability project because sustainability is such an enormous challenge. To meet that challenge, Korten (1991-2, p. 188) argues that “we now need a revolution in thinking no less profound than the Copernican revolution.” For just as the Copernican revolution represented a successful challenge to the entire system of ancient authority, the revolution in thinking we need must now “present a similar challenge to what have arguably become the most powerful institutions of contemporary authority - the institutions of transnational capital” (p. 188).

A number of authors recognize the implicit link between sustainability and learning. Cary (1992, p. 283) asserts that “the dynamic nature of sustainability involves a continuous learning experiment.” Prugh et al (2000) advise that sustainability will require certain virtues, especially restraint and the ability to learn adaptively. Siebenhüner (2000) takes the link one step further, calling for sustainability as a social learning process, and arguing that

Sustainability also requires the capability to solve complex problems with many variables and discontinuous developments, challenging human cognitive capabilities (p. 21).

In other words, learning for sustainability does not come naturally. It has to be fostered, achieved, worked toward and valorized. Like the air we breathe, it must become a basic necessity for survival. And just as lifelong learning is a lifelong human endeavour, sustainability must become a lifelong human undertaking. This sense of long-term commitment binds the two in a potent alliance that can challenge corporate globalization and result in individual and community well-being.

**Lifelong Learning Reconceptualized**

As currently understood, however, lifelong learning is incapable of countering the impacts
of corporate globalization and allying with communities in their search for sustainability. In fact, it has probably contributed to unsustainability in its role of servant to the global market, putting corporate profitability before individual and community well-being. How can lifelong learning be re-conceptualized to serve community interests and promote sustainability?

The three building blocks of counter-hegemony, dialogue and life values that have formed a foundation for a critical understanding of sustainability can also form a foundation for a critical understanding of lifelong learning. The counter-hegemonic dimension gives lifelong learning a critical attitude, an element of suspicion that can analyse relations of domination and learn to question them. The dialogical dimension invites community members to be active participants in their own lifelong learning through two-way (or more) communication. The life-values dimension provides lifelong learning with a values orientation that is directly opposed to the money values of the “learning for earning” ethos promoted by corporate globalization. Together, these three dimensions can work together to infuse lifelong learning with a critical, participatory, life-affirming vigour.

From this new perspective, lifelong learning can align with the idea of social learning. Social learning processes are central to the formation of active citizens (Welton 1997), who can counter the impacts of corporate globalization and work toward sustainability. Since sustainability involves an ongoing learning process among community members, an alliance with social learning is essential if lifelong learning is to contribute to community sustainability. At the same time, social learning is not without its own problems, from the point of view of sustainability. It has been defined in the community planning literature as “the process of framing issues, analyzing alternatives, and debating choices in the context of inclusive public deliberation” (Daniels and Walker, 1996, p. 73). Such a definition, however, only promotes the dimension of dialogue, ignoring the other two dimensions. Serrano (2000) adds the dimension of counter-hegemony to the idea of social learning in the adult education literature when he contends that

New forms of social learning - forms that challenge dominant learning practice and contribute to social transformation - are necessary in order to find our way out of the present global crisis of environment and development (p. 93).

Serrano goes on to advocate a kind of critical social learning, by which he means

From a critical perspective the key concern here is whether or not such social learning is merely reinforcing existing unjust social arrangements or promoting transformation toward a more egalitarian and sustainable society (p. 94).

This critical social learning, however, still lacks a life-values dimension, which would help to guide adult educators and lifelong learners in their choices and actions. What we need is a kind of learning that can encompass all three dimensions and will contribute to community sustainability and future well-being. Lifelong learning can become that kind of learning if it encompasses these three dimensions and if it commits to working for community sustainability. Such a lifelong learning would involve a trialectical learning matrix - a web of dynamic interactions between the dimensions of dialogue, counter hegemony and life values. It would be a
kind of learning that involved two-way (or more) communication, eschewed tacit consent as a way of engaging with the world and affirmed life values with every choice and action.

_Lifelong Learning Joins Globalization from Below_

Just as the corporate agenda has gone global, the resistance to it spreads from community to community, resulting in the phenomenon of globalization from below. Described as a worldwide movement of resistance, globalization from below has now established itself as a global opposition, representing the interests of people and the environment (Brecher et al 2000). Lifelong learning is faced with a fundamental choice: to side with the forces of globalization from above, promoting the corporate agenda and undermining the sustainability of rural and urban communities, or to side with grass-roots solidarity of globalization from below, promoting the civil commons and working for community sustainability. In practice, such a choice is seldom so clearly defined, but putting it in starkly oppositional terms helps us to understand the implications of choices made and actions taken concerning lifelong learning. A strategic alliance with globalization from below can meet Collins' (1997) argument that lifelong learning calls for educators to align themselves with the need to foster civil society globally through an internationalist pedagogy. Such an internationalist pedagogy would involve a kind of lifelong learning for sustainability, engaging active local and global citizens, thus linking communities of place with communities of space in the quest for future well-being.

**Bibliography**


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