ECOLOGICAL IDENTITIES AS FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY COMPETENCIES: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CONSERVATION PSYCHOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE CAMPUSES

Author: Almut Beringer

Institution: University of Prince Edward Island

Country: Canada
Ecological identities as foundation for sustainability competencies: contributions from conservation psychology and sustainable campuses

Almut Beringer, PhD

Abstract
Competency acquisition is a key issue in education for sustainable development. Which skills are critical to realize the sustainability imperative and how these are to be taught are central questions. This paper complements the prevailing discourse by focusing on the notion of ecological identity. Guided by the theoretical framework of conservation psychology, the paper asks whether ecological identity, ecological identity development, and ecological identity work should be given more attention as underlying psychological forces in motivating pro-environmental/sustainability values and behaviours. Empirical evidence supports the claim that sustainable campuses/sustainable university projects can nurture students’ intellectual, moral, social and identity development.

One of the contributions sustainable universities and campuses make toward more sustainable futures is as exemplary ‘lifeworlds’ (Lebenswelten) where students, staff, faculty and others may experience sustainable living (cf. Stoltenberg 2000). As such, they may be ‘seeding grounds’ for ecological identities: conceptions of self-in-relation, specifically with natural worlds, which form the basis for pro-environmental behaviours (cf. Clayton and Opotow 2003, Myers and Beringer forthcoming). This paper sketches the notion of ecological identity and asks what contributions, if any, conservation psychology may make to the competency discourse in sustainability in higher education. The paper shares the findings of two studies which investigated students’ psychological development, including development of an ecological self (e.g. Mathews 1994, Naess 1990) through on-
campus, real-life sustainability project learning. The development of ecological identities within sustainable campus projects is offered as an addendum to the varying competency notions as well as a foundation, if not alternative, to competency acquisition.

Conservation psychology

The emerging subdiscipline or ‘superfield’ of conservation psychology seeks to apply psychology theory, research, and methods to resolve pressing environmental challenges (Saunders 2003). The notion and term ‘conservation psychology’ – as distinct from environmental and/or ecopsychology (for details see Beringer 2006) – is parallel to and adapted from the applied discipline of conservation biology. Networks of researchers, scholars and practitioners work on real-life problems toward the durable individual and collective human behaviour change which is vital in sustainability and sustainable development. Conservation psychology has emerged and understands itself, at least in part, as a response to mainstream psychology which traditionally limited its sphere of inquiry to human/social concerns and forces; consequently, natural environments and/or sustainability concerns have been marginalized and/or are considered beyond the field (cf. Kidner 1994, see Human Ecology Review vol. 10 no. 2 2003 for more detail).

In light of a critique of mainstream psychology and its limitations for sustainability/sustainable development, conservation psychology may be a valuable theoretical framework for sustainability in higher education. Specifically, psychological theories on college-age intellectual, moral and identity development need to inform sustainability education – discourse and practice – at the post-secondary level (cf. Myers & Beringer forthcoming).

Competencies and motivations for sustainable living

What competencies and/or key competencies – a qualification pointing to the significance of certain competencies relevant across different spheres of life and for all individuals (cf.
Barth et al. 2007) – are required to successfully master sustainable development, and how these can best be acquired, is a central issue in sustainability education; as such, it dominates segments of the sustainability education discourse (cf. DeSeCo Project, www.deseco.admin.ch; see also http://www.kompetenztagung.de/). Notwithstanding the fact that little agreement exists regarding (key) competencies, and that compiling comprehensive sets of necessary proficiencies is somewhat arbitrary (Barth et al. 2007), certain skills are accepted as critical for sustainability. These include lifelong learning skills such as creative and critical thinking, oral and written communication, collaboration and cooperation, conflict management, decision-making, problem-solving and planning (UNESCO 2004: 20 in Barth et al. 2007) and competencies in foresighted thinking; interdisciplinary work; cosmopolitan perception, transcultural understanding and cooperation; participatory skills; planning and implementation; capacity for empathy, compassion and solidarity; in self-motivation and in motivating others; and in distanced reflection on individual and cultural models (de Haan 2006: 22-25 in Barth et al. 2007). These proficiencies are reflected in the notion of ‘emancipatory’ sustainability education which “imagines a very transparent society, with action competent citizens, who actively and critically participate in problem solving and decision making, and value and respect alternative ways of thinking, valuing and doing” (Wals & Jickling 2002: 225).

How individuals learn pro-environmental behaviours has long been a question in and for environmental education. Values-attitudes-behaviour models of human functioning have dominated the environment and behaviour field as well as environmental education research to understand and explain pro-environmental decisions and lifestyles. In recent years, the notion of ecological identity as motivating pro-environmental values and behaviours – and, in extension, sustainable living – is gaining prominence in psychological research and theory. Ecological identity includes “how people see themselves in the context of nature, how people see animate and inanimate aspects of the natural world, how people relate to the natural world as a whole, and how people relate to each other in the
context of larger environmental issues” (Clayton & Opotow 2003: 5-6). As such, the concept of ecological identity deserves attention as a motivating force in acquiring (key) competencies for sustainable development. A question to be explored here is the notion of a ‘sustainability identity:’ how does an inclination or a predisposition toward sustainability develop and mature, and how can an affinity (or even aptitude?) for sustainability be nurtured in post-secondary institutions? Research into ecological identity, the development of ecological identities, and ecological identity work (Thomashow 1995) holds insights into competency acquisition for sustainable development which are yet to be fully explored.

**Sustainable campuses**
A psychological significance of higher education institutions as sustainability lifeworlds is their potential for being seeding grounds for ecological identities. Sustainability challenges can advance students’ intellectual and socio-moral development, as they incorporate different perspectives on value questions and require responses that are both intellectually disciplined and ethically committed (Myers & Beringer forthcoming). If, indeed, sustainable university projects foster the development of ecological identities and further, ecological identities support the acquisition of (key) competencies for sustainable development, then post-secondary institutions have a mandate to support students’ emerging ecological self and to provide opportunities for ecological identity work: to “set up learning situations that allow people to reflect on the possibilities of ecological identity” (Thomashow 1995: 4-5).

**Empirical evidence**
Two research projects, one at Western Washington University, USA, the other at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, examined students’ psychological development in and through sustainable campus work.

*Intellectual development in an experimental core course*
Students at Huxley College, Western Washington University, USA enrolled in an interdisciplinary, project-based third-year core course with learner-centred pedagogy were monitored between 2001 and 2004. Student learning in eight sections was assessed by administering the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID) pre- and post-course. A professionally certified MID rater scored student essays. Data indicate an upward shift in the distribution of scores. Findings suggest the use of local place-based, interdisciplinary, ill-structured problem-solving and learning community/learner-centred pedagogies, in addition with teaching explicit analytic tools, may help drive intellectual and socio-moral development toward the kind of situated and committed critical learning that emancipatory education for sustainability envisions (see Myers and Beringer forthcoming for details).

Identity development while empowering students to make their campuses more sustainable

Using the campus as a learning laboratory (cf. Vezzoli & Penin 2006), students research and advocate sustainable practices on their campuses under the guidance of an experienced Environmental Studies academic. The focus are real-life sustainability challenges and their solution; the context and outcome for students is an immersion experience in sustainability theory and practice. Data sources were the Campus Planning Studio at Western Washington University, open to any student, and a second-year Sustainability and Sustainable Development course at the University of Prince Edward Island. Qualitative data were collected via participant observation and student journals. Qualitative and anecdotal data indicate intellectual, identity, community and empowerment outcomes:

• students’ identity of ‘learner’ is being transformed as they simultaneously become change agents (i.e. transformations as activists)
• the campus and classroom are more than a resource for passive learning
• team-centred project work contributes to students’ empowerment and builds a collective identity
• students’ sense of belonging and sense of community can increase
• there is evidence for the emergence of an inner feeling of mastery and ownership
These findings indicate sustainability may be providing a new, broader frame of reference for these students’ emerging social identities. The courses provide a key social frontier to explore alternative identities; their effects are in part attributable to the ‘real-world’ difference to other courses.

A research agenda for conservation psychology in higher education
This paper argues for exploring the potential of conservation psychology for sustainability in higher education, with particular reference to relevant competencies and their acquisition – in whatever conceptual notions ‘competency/-ies’ may be understood. While conservation psychology as a theoretical framework for sustainability in higher education may have potential, it is to date incomplete. Conceptual and methodological questions are waiting to be addressed. What is needed is a conservation psychology sensitive to sustainability paradigm issues that promises to serve consolidating conceptual notions and empirical measurement. Whether ‘conservation psychology’ is the correct idea and term for an applied inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary approach to sustainability questions; whether conservation psychology as currently understood is too restrictive both conceptually and methodologically within the sustainability paradigm and for sustainability science; whether a ‘sustainability psychology’ or a ‘psychology for sustainable development’ may be more appropriate and what this may mean theoretically, methodologically and/or practically; does conservation/sustainability psychology have room for metaphysical inquiry – these kind of questions deserve further consideration.

References


This paper is abbreviated and adapted from two previous manuscripts: Beringer (2006) and Myers & Beringer (forthcoming) [see reference list for details]. Paper and extracts with the co-author’s consent.

Professional biography
Almut Beringer, PhD is Associate Professor/Director, Environmental Studies and Sustainability, Faculty of Arts, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada and Senior Lecturer, School of Outdoor Education and Environment, La Trobe University, Australia. Contact: aberinger@upei.ca

Postal address
Dr. Almut Beringer
Faculty of Arts, Environmental Studies and Sustainability
University of Prince Edward Island
550 University Ave., Charlottetown, PEI C1A 4P3, Canada
e-mail: aberinger@upei.ca, phone: +1 902 566 0509, fax: +1 902 566 0304