

# Transforming Sustainability Education: Ethics, Leadership, Community Engagement, and Social Entrepreneurship

By: [Chanelle D. James, PhD](#) and [Cathryne L. Schmitz, PhD, ACSW](#)

James, C. D. & Schmitz, C. L. (2011). Transforming sustainability education: Ethics, leadership, community engagement, and social entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2 (5).

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## **Abstract:**

Globally, organizations continue to be challenged regarding their impact on citizens, cultures, and the environment. As a result sustainability has become an important curricular element in leadership education. We examine the relationship between ethics, social justice, and sustainability as a response to the need to develop curriculum that encourages students to consider social value creation in leadership decisions. To meet this important challenge we suggest a multi-disciplinary, community-based learning approach to sustainability with the focus on spurring creativity, innovation, and alternative models of education and practice for community and workplace success. Community engagement and social entrepreneurship serve as teaching and learning tools. Through this curricular approach, a new generation of students is influenced to tap into ethical and just actions that will positively affect workplace options.

**Key Words:** Sustainability, Education, Social Entrepreneurship, Community Engagement, Environment, Justice

## **Article:**

### ***1. Introduction***

Many of the issues that plague the global community are related to sustainability and social responsibility (Golemen, 2009; Roger, Jalal, & Boyd, 2008). These ethical considerations add an additional layer of complexity that has an impact on available solutions for wise development. As environmental issues are intertwined with the economic needs, social concerns and political inequality (Jones, 2008), new kinds of analysis emerge calling to question commonly held beliefs and actions. This analysis supports the need to return to a definition of sustainable community development based on the triple bottom line analysis of economics, social justice, and the environment was originally put forward by Brundtland Commission (World Commission, 1987). Working together in the development of local communities, grounded in knowledge of the global context, creates “living economies” (Shiva, 2005) that protect both ecosystems and income. Living economies comprise the kinds of solutions key to the development of sustainable practices. Well-designed and structured sustainability practices can create positive benefits for organizations, the environment, and the economy. From the perspective of Buddhist economics, work is more than an end. Work provides the context for the individual to develop their strengths, join with others toward a common goal, and create goods and services (Schumacher, 1989).

The challenge then is defining the approaches that are appropriate in connecting meaningful work with sustainable community outcomes. A curricular shift is required in response to the demand to redress unsustainable business practices and to redefine the role of business in society (Hart, 2010). Business schools sometimes fail to engage the exploration of sustainability holistically because of the lure to view sustainability as a tool for profitability instead of responsibility (Epstein, 2010; Johnston, Evard, Santillo, & Robèrt, 2007). In the lure to see the economy as strictly financial, the environmental and justice concerns are neglected. Consequently, the conversation focuses solely on consumer demand for sustainable products and services that respond to the ethical and practical maintenance of our environment and short-term profit. Transformative

change of the kind needed to address the issue of sustainability requires a shift in pedagogical practices in leadership and management education (Smith, Barr, Barbosa, & Kickul, 2008).

Refocusing our academic institutions with their knowledge building cultural systems to engage the community in collaborative development regarding environmental sustainability links students, faculty, and community together providing the possibility for interconnecting the issues and the possibility for creating models of change (Orr, 2004). We posit that a multi-disciplinary, community-based learning approach that includes community engagement and social entrepreneurship as core learning components offers a teaching and learning tool for a new generation of students. Leadership education is the place where perspectives on the role of the organizations begin to develop, creating the opportunity to position sustainability as one of the primary values. One way to ensure that leaders have the foundation for sustainable decision-making and transformative change is through fundamental change in the education of our leaders. Theories that encourage critical thinking, individual action, and advocacy for the collective responsibility for resources, provide a framework for sustainability education grounded in preservation of the environment from a just and equitable approach (Johnson et al., 2007). These theories move environmental sustainability from being solely an issue of economic growth to a place where economic activities are supportive of wellbeing and justice. Epstein's (2008) model for the development of corporate sustainability suggests that through leadership and the development of sustainability practices, leaders can have a significant impact.

## **2. Multi-Disciplinary Sustainability Education**

As economic and social connections become more global there seems to be an undeniable relationship between our social needs and opportunities, and a world view perspective. Higher education with a focus on sustainability constructs curriculum that addresses these interlocking concerns and provides a framework for leadership development that strengthens the learner understanding of sustainable issues. Changes in the global community create the opportunity to examine new questions about the role of management (and leadership) education (Michaelson, 2010). The complexity of global social issues is not adequately addressed through emerging models built from smaller concepts, which may not fully explain important variables like poverty, health care and education (Goldstein, Hazy, & Silberstang, 2008). Ecological modernization and a risk-oriented society (Blowers, 2003, p.235) complicate our understanding of the term sustainability. As a result, a key impediment to establishing sustainability education and practice anchored in an ethical context is the existence of multiple reinterpretations and redefinitions of sustainability (Johnston et al., 2007).

Authors such as Siegel (2009) argue against consideration of ethical/justice consideration to green management from a strict monetary focus. Many organizations, in responding to the current interest in the environment lean toward definitions of sustainability that allow them to maintain their "profitable" position. From this standpoint, theoretical frameworks are limited and important components that affect the relationship between society and the environment like inequality and community are ignored (Blowers). This focus on economic values as the central concern leads to theory that easily discounts the success of sustainability efforts. A holistic focus on sustainability centers around the relationships and responsibilities that address economic issues, concern for the environment, and the socially just treatment of people. In fact, the centrality of economic value over other concerns has been critiqued (Calas, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009). The combined focus on green management, sustainability, and social justice is good business, which benefits the organization and the consumer. Without ethical consideration sustainability lacks the ability to transform environmental problems.

In leadership education in particular it has become important to examine an organization's functions and strategies with a lens on how decision-making can have a global impact in terms of sustainability. This examination of leadership encourages conceptual thinking (Doh, 2003), which creates broader solutions with a more comprehensive perspective. A critical part of the skill set developed in business education should include leadership integrity, which requires a change in mindset linking resources globally and examining the ecological impact that organizational decisions have on the world (Waddock, 2007). This supports the development of educational models that use more than economic growth as a solution to environmental concerns, supporting a curriculum that balances economic interests with broader global and cultural concerns.

This approach to education would mean that issues like justice and sustainability are held equal to profit. The interlocking concerns are typical of the issues that students encounter as they become professionals, and as a result universities should focus on leadership development from a multi-disciplinary perspective. This results in a juncture of creativity where technological development and economic growth merge into new industries, and where training/educational programs expand (Jones, 2008). As David Orr (2004) posits The great ecological issues of our time have to do in one way or another with our failure to see things in their entirety. That failure occurs when minds are taught to think in boxes and not taught to transcend those boxes or to question overly much how they fit with other boxes. (pp. 94-95) Yet, our educational and knowledge building processes have moved academia away from this holistic worldview.

Disciplines have become increasingly specialized, informational silos limiting cross-disciplinary knowledge development (Robinson, 2001). Loyalty within the discipline interrupts the ability to reach across knowledge boundaries toward holistic creativity (Orr, 2004) in analyzing and resolving the complex issues we face. Just as cultures are faced with ethnocentrism, so are disciplines influenced by a “positivist proclivity identified by an attempt to codify what is perceived as objective knowledge” (Raelin, 2007, p. 498). In this sense business decisions that are primarily economic, marginalizes other forms of knowing in the human experience. Ali and Krishnan (1994) note the ethnocentrism inherent in most current management theories, which are tilted toward western worldviews. The western view privileging economics as the central means of decision-making proves to be short term in perspective (Uhlener & Thurik, 2007), failing to address a plethora of needs including social justice and environmental sustainability. Change necessitates shifting the socially constructed definition of “success” from short-term profits to long-term economic and environmental sustainability (Jones, 2008).

As we expand into multi-disciplinary knowledge development, we also need to expand into the community, creating learning centers for professional development. Given our current knowledge, it is not whether a leader or manager is experienced or newly hired that determines their ability to make ethical decisions (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). In the case of sustainability making ethical decisions rest on exposure to the true impact of environmental concerns. We can posit is that the transformational leader might be more willing to explore sustainable practices as an ethical issue. This is a motivational and influential leader who is optimistic and entertains new possibilities and perspectives (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003) Shiva (2005) challenges us to move from the local to the global earth democracy, a blending of indigenous worldviews with the move toward sustainability and justice. As recognized by the Iroquois, "In every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation... even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine" (Great Law of the Iroquois).

This philosophical position posits that our survival is dependent upon a shift in worldview. Ironically, just as indigenous cultures have been pushed to the side, they may hold the key to developing a sustainable relationship with the earth (Clarkson, Morrissette, & Regallet, 1992). As indigenous communities struggle against marginalization and poverty, they search for mechanisms that create economic opportunities while reclaiming local control. Multi-disciplinary leadership education can purposefully be designed to address global issues of sustainability and corporate social responsibility from an environmental and social justice perspective. In this examination we explore multi-disciplinary education for sustainability leadership grounded in understanding the global multicultural context. Cross-cultural understanding is critical to the development of key curriculum aspects because change includes legitimating the existing challenges faced by vulnerable populations and exploring green living options that have the potential to redress inequality. Social entrepreneurship and community engagement are embedded as both community building and student learning tools.

### **3. Community Engagement and a Commitment to Social Justice**

In a course focused on sustainability as well as social justice, students explore green options as the means by which to recalibrate their understanding of human relationships to other life forms. To do so requires engagement in the community, a partnership really, to see from the inside out how green initiatives envelop a commitment to social justice. This is particularly important at a time when “Globalization theory, which speaks of ethics, hides the fact that its ethics are those of the marketplace and not the universal ethics of the human

person” (Freire, 1998, p. 114). Critical exploration of the political, economic, cultural, and social conditions that foster or impede programs designed to create sustainable change creates the context for students and faculty alike to challenge and reflect on what they know and do not know, rather than merely offering a gathering location to exchange static knowledge (Freire, 1998). This pedagogical focus is one geared toward ethics, democracy, justice, and civic courage. Kenworthy-U’Ren (2008) notes the rise of service-learning courses following some public debacles and ethical lapses among prominent United States (U.S.) business leaders (Enron being perhaps the most obvious) as a tool for teaching students the ethical underpinnings of communal life.

Community engagement through service-learning experiences creates a gateway to the community as the site for enriched learning. Students learn along side community members how systemic, institutional, and other forces operate to enhance or challenge their work (Goodnough, Kildegaard, Kuchenreuther, Rasmussen, & Wyckoff, 2009). In order to be meaningful, these experiences engage instruction that aggressively and transparently reject models of charity (doing for others) in favor of communication and action with vulnerable populations so that the students can “verify the ‘injustice’ through substantial, legitimate data” of an ethnographic character along with hard facts, statistics, and reports (Artz, 2001, p. 244). Educator David Purple (1999) critiques traditional modes of instruction for failing to adequately teach students about the persistent injustices in the world that would lead to a necessary moral outrage.

He calls for progressive forms of instruction that cut across disciplines to address the economic, political, cultural, and social systems that inform our educational practices: As educators we need to be concerned not so much with minimum scores as with minimum wages, not with classroom deportment as much as with business ethics, less with the distribution of grades than with the distribution of wealth (Purple, p. 197). Having students participate with existing ventures or start ones of their own in the community instantiates the classroom learning with lived experiences that cement theoretical learning in practical ventures. It is not just a matter of students getting “real world” experiences that concerns us here. This model builds on the link between the emergence of new types of economies, creativity, sustainability, and entrepreneurial activity (Parrish & Foxon, 2009). Business schools in cooperation with other academic fields have the ability to convincingly demonstrate and model that business ventures, such as social entrepreneur activities, are well situated to change the world, with or without a profit motive. We agree with Neubaum, Pagell, Drexler, McKee-Ryan, & Larson (2009) who assert that business ethics education, for instance, is a necessary and vital component of more than just ethics courses. As long as business schools continue to use money, sometimes clothed in other terms like economic development or capital investments, as the ultimate indicator of business success, we are doomed to retaining old ways of thinking (Neubaum et al.).

A myriad of the conceptions of success in business, including engagement and development through social entrepreneur ventures emanating from local, community concerns, are neglected. The burgeoning field of social entrepreneurship is situated within the stream of exploration regarding sustainable practices, economic development, and the surge of technological development. The ethical underpinnings of social entrepreneurship are transparent—collaboration, community, creativity, and care—adding to its value. Within universities this nexus creates the opportunity to spur creativity, innovation, and alternative models of education and practice for workplace success. Demands to address complex social issues require that curricular decisions made at universities include pedagogical approaches that encourage learners to create solutions. Teaching and learning about social entrepreneurship offers a distinctive contribution to the current conversation regarding the preparation of workers for the global community. In citing the contributions of a September 2004 special issue of *Academy of Management Learning and Education* on the theories, methods, and best practices in entrepreneurship education, Tracey and Phillips (2007) rightly note that “entrepreneurship education requires a strong experiential component” (p. 265).

For social entrepreneurship education, a priority is assigned to alleviating a social ill, with the additional goal of teaching business skills in an authentic context (Flannery & Pragman, 2008). Choices in literature and community partner are made with care as we focus on creating a platform for providing students with a glimpse

into the ideology and rhetoric of social justice “...to create educational experiences that prepare [future] social entrepreneurs for the demanding and often ambiguous world of social enterprise” (Tracey & Phillips, p. 270). Social entrepreneurship is a viable option with multiple implementation models emerging across the globe (Anderson, Honig, & Peredo, 2006). The models vary as do the communities (Anderson et al.) and in their diversity and creativity for western economics and management education. As emerging markets, opportunity for growth abounds. KIVA (<http://www.kiva.org/>) provides a small window into the potential for stimulating entrepreneurial growth through micro lending. In and of itself, KIVA exemplifies social entrepreneurial development that is cross cultural, global in nature, and links the global to the local as the center for growth.

#### **4. A Multi-Disciplinary Course**

We created a multi-disciplinary course, at a medium size comprehensive university in the southeastern U.S., with a focus sustainability education using community engagement and social entrepreneurship as educational tools. The sustainability model presented by the Brundtland Commission (World Commission, 1987) framed the development of the course. Indigenous ideas of sustainability and theories of innovation/venture model development are integrated. To be truly multi-disciplinary, not one but multiple academic fields shared in the design, planning, and implementation of courses. Through collaborative development, equity of thought and processes, as well as literature bases and theories, informed the outcome.

The faculty development and teaching group includes members from Business Administration, Communication Studies, Social Work, and Women and Gender Studies and more recently added Conflict and Peace Studies. Among the challenges tackled were the barriers to theory building across disciplines, fair and equitable compensation for teaching the course, shared control of appropriate course content, and administrative issues of teaching a course from multiple disciplines. This multi-disciplinary course is designed to expose graduate and upper class undergraduate students to the concepts of social and economic justice, multiple models for designing and implementing community-based projects (including social entrepreneurship), and sustainability.

Teams of students are encouraged to investigate environmental concerns, identify related issues of justice, and create and inspire a model for direct action, including the assessment of the potential impact of social entrepreneurship in the community and society at large. Students are expected to assess diversity, oppression, and justice issues in a target area, drawing on relationships locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. They are encouraged to view their projects not only on the premise of current solutions, but also with an eye toward sustainability that considers the next seven generations. This multi-disciplinary course reflects the growing understanding that today’s social issues are best addressed through the collaborative thinking and action of people with varied interests, experiences, and knowledge bases. Within this learning context, we seek to expose students to their peers from other academic disciplines as they engage in knowledge development, community assessment, development, and community action through a social entrepreneurial venture that can make a positive impact in the community. Our explicit discussion of and reflection on community engagement underscores the need for citizen participation and social change. Educators can shape curriculum that recognizes the role that business in collaboration with other social science fields might have in shaping in how the world operates.

The collaborative focus on social justice, the environment, and social entrepreneurship gives us a unique opportunity to engage the topic of sustainability. The action orientation empowers students to do something about the desperate situations that characterize human interaction with the environment. As we introduce students to the complexity of the issues faced by individuals, communities, businesses, governments, and agencies, the multi-disciplinary nature becomes clear. Students learn of theories that are multi-contextual as they ponder how to develop solutions that are workable for multiple stakeholders. Students begin to deal with the issues of scalability for social entrepreneurs working toward environmental sustainability. In this case students grow to understand that sustainability within the organization might take on nontraditional forms. In that vein our course focused on three objectives for student learning:

1. Assess the characteristics of social and economic justice, community and community building, sustainability,

and social entrepreneurship;

2. Compare multi-disciplinary principles, theories, and concepts related to sustainability; and

3. Analyze the issues of sustainability and the impact of social entrepreneurship in local and global contexts;

Students entering the course come from multiple disciplines including, business, social work, peace and conflict studies, biology, the arts, and technology. They are graduate and undergraduate students. Most have no awareness of sustainability issues. Across time, the significance of context and layered learning has become increasingly apparent. Students need first to learn about social justice, sustainability, and community building. Parallel to this process, they are moved into learning groups where they have to work together on analyzing, synthesizing, and applying concepts from multiple disciplines. Beginning 1/4 to 1/3 into the course, the concepts of social entrepreneurship and development are introduced. At the same time, students are immersed in community engagement through service learning. The process of multi-disciplinary team development as they exchange disciplinary knowledge is at the core of the teaching and learning process. Within their teams students explore the issues, engage in community assessment and building, and develop a model for change. The projects range from local in nature to the development of global websites. As a culmination, students invite community members as they present their change models. Again, university/community partners discuss, critique, and develop.

### **5. The Future for Sustainability Education**

In April 2009, Mark C. Taylor of Columbia University wrote an op-ed in the New York Times calling for a radical overhaul of higher education instruction to eliminate the highly specialized knowledge being nurtured, in favor of a multi-disciplinary approach that is more capable of solving today's most difficult challenges. The division-of-labor model of separate departments is obsolete and must be replaced with a curriculum structured like a web or complex adaptive network. Responsible teaching and scholarship must become cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural. By bringing together scholars from multiple fields, curriculum opportunities expand exponentially as education reclaims its rightful position as a space to meaningfully engage and deliberate about important issues. Sustainability education provides a space in the community of scholarship for this sort of engaged learning. As this movement pertains to sustainability, an important pedagogical resource is provided in multi-disciplinary education for students from social science disciplines, including business schools. In teaching sustainability through a multi-disciplinary faculty alliance, students are exposed to expanded perspectives and skills they can bring to their field of practice. Students begin to learn multiple approaches to sustainability through practices like social entrepreneurship and service learning, as they prepare for their professional work.

The growing movement of interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary teaching allows students to be exposed to a wider variety of theoretical, philosophical, and ethical mandates for community development. The importance of this is critical, not just for student learning, but also for recognizing the decisive role of higher education in shaping a student's future direction and ethical choices. To offer this kind of learning experience, universities are more often valuing interdisciplinary activities among students and faculty. This kind of curricular design relies not only on inclusion in general education curricula, but also in upper level courses that support degree completion. This support includes:

- support for Liberal Education Degree program with rigorous pedagogical approaches;
- support service learning requirements across academic departments that result in community engagement;
- an increase emphasis on moral, ethical, and social justice issues within professional programs in the academy and specifically in management education; and
- research and curricular funding support for programs that include sustainability education.

A commitment to sustainability education can transform the global response to the environment. The amount of transformation that takes place depends in part on the commitment universities show in involving future learners in the importance of leadership development through an ethical, justice and green lens.

### Note:

<sup>1</sup> Sud, VanSandt, & Baugous (2008) argue that a venture's sustainability might be tenuous if the venture model is based on alleviating a social ill. Dees, Anderson, & Wei-Skillem (2004) however make the case that issues of sustainability must be define differently in order to measure success. We also posit that the main goal for the social entrepreneur might be to close operations because the goal of eradication has been met.

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