Sustainability Higher Education in the Context of Bearn's University of Beauty

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Abstract: Sustainability and its relationship with education has been the subject of much contestation in recent decades. This article reviews some of the debates on sustainability in the context of higher education and raises concern about the narrowing of the discourse on sustainability and sustainability education in the neoliberal university. The methods used in this article are philosophical, combining traditional concept analysis with concept creation. The later method holds that philosophical concepts are created or reimagined so that they have transformative effects in the world. The key finding of this conceptual exploration is that sustainability (education) can be liberated from the fetters of neoliberalism and can be imagined differently. This might be possible in the "University of Beauty". Moreover, the potential for reimagining sustainability higher education already exists within the neoliberal university and in those who inhabit it. This is because sustainability higher education and those who inhabit the neoliberal university are always in the process of becoming. The article concludes that the present generation of students should be viewed as key role players in rethinking sustainability higher education.

Keywords: complicated conversation; higher education; neoliberal university; performativity; sustainability education; university of beauty

1. Introduction

Sustainability, a term used in German forest management practices since the 18th century, makes its appearance in an English dictionary for the first time in the 1970s. Its usage in the English language is the consequence of a growing awareness in the post-World War II period that we inhabit a planet with finite resources and also because of the dawning awareness during this period that the actions of humans are resulting in the destruction of the environment (By environment, I am referring to the more/other-than-human-world), depicted in seminal works such as Aldo Leopold's [1] *A Sand County Almanac* and Rachel Carson's [2] *Silent Spring*. Over the years, sustainability has been used adjectivally with many entities, with the most enduring being "development" to create the compound term "sustainable development". The most popular definition of sustainable development is the one captured in the Brundtland Commission report, recommending "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [3]. Since its coinage, the term "sustainable development" has been embraced broadly: by supranational organisations, governments and the corporate world. Sustainable development has been the central concept in several intergovernmental conventions on environment over the past three decades such as the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and its follow-up conferences. Furthermore, in 2015 all of the United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is to serve as a blueprint for sustaining peace and prosperity for people and planet, in the present and the future [4]. This agenda will be driven by the now well-known 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), which call for actions on the part of countries individually as well as in partnership with one another.

The notion of sustainability, and in particular its couching as sustainable development, has been contested in the literature. Some of the main—and well-rehearsed—criticisms levelled against sustainability/sustainable development in the literature are the following: "it has internal contradictions, it manifests epistemological difficulties, it reinforces a problematic anthropocentric stance, it has great appeal as a political slogan, it is a euphemism for unbridled economic growth, it is too fuzzy a term to convey anything useful, and it does not take into consideration the asymmetrical relationship between present and future generations" [5] (p. 95). Notwithstanding the criticisms, scholars have argued that the notion of sustainability should not be dispensed with but rather imagined differently. For example, Bonnett [6] argued for a shift in perspective from sustainability as policy to sustainability as a frame of mind. Hroch [7] elaborates that we should not only "sustain" things but instead become "sustainability" thinkers, that we should think differently about ourselves, our becoming and about the very concept of "sustainability". In critiquing the co-option of the notion of sustainability by governments, the military and the corporate world, Parr [8] argues for an alternative conception of sustainability which she terms a "sustainability culture". Sustainability culture is a grassroots movement that is driven by the productive power of *potentia*, which connects and enhances life in juxtaposition to the hierarchical and colonising power of *potestas*, which is evident in notions of sustainability adopted by governments, supranational organisations, the military and the corporate world. Brown [9] (p. 13) draws on Ernesto Laclau's notion of an "empty signifier" and argues that if sustainability is viewed as an empty signifier, then it provides space for the inclusion of discourses that are antagonistic to the hegemonization of sustainability into the prevailing narrow discourse of sustainable development. Furthermore, Tillmanns et al. [10] and Le Grange [11] contend that the concept of sustainability should be viewed rhizomatically—a concept with no fixed central point and therefore always in-becoming. And Hroch [7] (p. 52) avers that we can think of sustainability through the concept of "refrain" (Hroch [7] borrows the concept "refrain" from Deleuze and Guattari [12], who understand "refrain" as creative rather than banal repetition.) (*la ritournelle*), which enables us to critique it, complicate and reconceptualise it, so that it could be liberated from common-sense understandings of the term. The notion of sustainability embraced in this article is that it is a concept in-becoming, that it cannot be reduced to common understandings of the term and to the narrow discourse of sustainable development.

The association of sustainability with education has also been contested and in particular its formulation as education for sustainability (EfS) or education for sustainable development (ESD). ESD is an approach to education that has been adopted by supranational organisations and many governments. In fact, the United Nations declared the years 2005–2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESC). Although some scholars such as Fien [13] and Huckle [14] have argued that education for sustainability is an imperative, others such as Jickling [15,16] have criticised the approach for its inherent for instrumentalism, arguing that it is tantamount to indoctrination. Le Grange [5] argues that "sustainability education" is a more useful signifier for a relationship between sustainability and education because it is non-instrumentalist. He writes: "Sustainability education does not signify an a priori image of sustainability nor defines what the education pathway towards achieving sustainability should be. Instead it opens up possibilities for critical discussions on sustainability and suggests a process that is always in-becoming" [5] (p. 96). Sustainability education, as just described, informs the key question of this article: how might we rethink pedagogy so that multiple pathways for the becoming of pedagogical lives (attuned to sustainability) could be invigorated?

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. The first section provides a brief description of the research methods. The second focuses on the nature of the neoliberal university and the narrow discourse on sustainability that it is likely to produce (or produces), because the neoliberal university is dominated by procedural reasoning—the technology, science and pedagogy in this university is fast. The third section focuses on the "University of Beauty" [17], an alternative to the neoliberal university and characterised by pointlessness. In the University of Beauty, technology may be fast, but science and pedagogy is slow or becomes slower. This section explores possibilities for implementing sustainability

education as outlined above. In the final section of the article, I share some parting thoughts. In this conceptual piece, where relevant I draw on examples and construct vignettes from my own institution, Stellenbosch University. I do so because there exists disciplinary and/or institutional differences among universities worldwide. Therefore, some emphasis is placed on the local/national context in the discussion of the neoliberal university.

2. Methods

In this article I use philosophical methods. I employ traditional concept analysis to clarify the meaning of terms such as "sustainability" and its relation to education. This is mainly done in the introduction. In the rest of the article, I move from concept analysis into the terrain of Deleuze-Guattarian [18] concept creation, where concepts are created or reimagined so as to have transformative effects in the world. Deleuze and Guattari [18] argue that through concept creation philosophy proposes solutions to problems faced by humanity at a given time. They contrast philosophy with science, which they argue aims to capture states of affairs as they are—science aims to mirror reality—to produce accurate descriptions of the world. In contrast, philosophy aims at transforming the world—or our understanding of the world. It is in this context that Deleuze and Guattari [18] (p. 84) write: "Philosophy does not consist of knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure". A philosophical concept does not have an identity because it is always in the process of becoming. Philosophical concepts are created and recreated. They are different to concepts of recognition such as flowers, animals, the sun, the moon, etc. I argue that sustainability and sustainability education are philosophical concepts and not concepts of recognition, and therefore open to rethinking or re-imagination.

The problem this article aims to address is how lines of escape might be invigorated from the narrowing of the discourse on sustainability that is so characteristic of the neoliberal university.

3. A Narrow Discourse on Sustainability in the Neoliberal University

When visiting many university campuses across the world one would observe clean buildings, manicured lawns and landscaped gardens. Moreover, the vision, mission or values statements of many universities incorporate concerns related to the environment and social justice. For example, one of the five values of my own university reads as follows: "Respect (civility in our mutual and public discourse, due regard for the freedom, equality and dignity of all, and respect for the environment" (https://www.sun.ac.za/english/about-us/strategic-documents). However, what might the appearance of beauty and the concern for people and the environment mask? Do those who inhabit the university know how the university functions within the larger economy of nature? "From where do its food, energy and water, and materials come and at what human and ecological cost? What ecological potentials does it have? What are the dominant soil types? Flora and Fauna? What of its geology and hydrology?" [19] (p. 210). Furthermore, what about matters of social justice? Do those who clean the buildings and manicure the lawns earn a living wage? Concerning the latter point, in South Africa the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 and 2016 laid bare the lack of transformation at some universities, particularly those that are ranked in the various world rankings systems [19]. One of the many issues that was exposed during these protests was that universities had outsourced cleaning services to labour brokers and therefore these outsourced workers were paid much less than they would have been paid had the university employed them directly.

Do students learn about environmental degradation and do they learn about issues of social justice in the contemporary university? The answer is in the affirmative, but as Orr [19] (p. 211) points out, in doing so students learn "the lesson of hypocrisy"—they learn that it is good enough to learn about social injustices and environmental degradation without having to do much about them. It may be the case that some students engage meaningfully with both environmental concerns and social justice issues as part of their university experience, but this is unlikely to broadly be the case. The reason why it is so unlikely is that the contemporary university is neoliberal in its

ideological orientation. Readings [20], in his seminal work *The University in Ruins*, contrasts the contemporary university with early incarnations: The Kantian University of Reason (for which the founding discipline is philosophy) and the Humboldtian University (in which philosophy was replaced with literature). Readings [20] posits that the contemporary university (he calls it modern university) is distinguished by the ideal of excellence, emphasising the institution of performativity. In depicting the contemporary university, Readings draws on Lyotard's [21] insights on performativity in his book, *The Postmodern Condition*. Readings [20] argues that the status of knowledge is changing as societies enter a postindustrial age and cultures a postmodern age. The key change is that knowledge is no longer produced in pursuit of truth but of performativity—that is, "the best input/output equation" [21] (p. 46). Since its usage by Lyotard, performativity has been widely invoked in the criticism of contemporary education practice. As Barnett and Standish [22] (p. 216) write: "The term aptly exposes the jargon and practices of efficiency and effectiveness, quality assurance and control, inspection and accountability that have become so prominent a feature of contemporary educational regimes. Whatever is undertaken must be justified in terms of an increase in productivity measured in terms of a gain in time".

Le Grange [23] avers that the rising culture of performativity in the contemporary university and broader society is closely intertwined with the (re)ascendancy of neoliberalism of the past four decades. The erosion of the welfare state has seen the state's role change from provider to that of regulator and monitor. Many state-funded universities have become state-aided universities as revenue in the form of state subsidies declines. For example, state-subsidy income of Stellenbosch University currently comprises approximately one third of its consolidated budget. In the current context, universities have to seek other streams of funding to traditional first stream (state-subsidy) and second stream (student fees) to include third (funding from research foundations and the corporate sector) and fourth (donor funding) streams. As second, third and fourth stream funding increases in relation to the university's total budget, so too do the interests of those who fund the university need to be satisfied. The upshot of all of these developments is that the contemporary university is characterized by increased marketisation and bureaucratisation. Managerialism has crept into all forms of scholarship, teaching, research and community engagement. In my own university, community engagement which was first termed "community interaction" (Community engagement was referred as "community interaction" to signify the reciprocal relationship between the university and members of communities.) is now referred to as "social impact" so that this activity can be translated into a performance indicator that is measurable. We have also witnessed the imposition of "ethical guidelines" by management as a source of control, causing Haggerty [24] to coin the term "ethics creep". In the neoliberal university academics are increasingly imperilled by forms of surveillance, including through performance management systems [25].

The contemporary university and those who inhabit it are valued in terms of metric adequacy. As noted, an increasing number of universities are participating in world rankings systems and the metric adequacy of the university determines who it is able to recruit (including international students) and may impact on the employability of its graduates. The metric adequacy of an academic is determined by performance scores, what his/her H-index is, what the impact factor of the journals is in which he/she published, and so forth. Furthermore, in the neoliberal university the technology, science and pedagogy is fast. The internet has compressed time and space. In the neoliberal university, where the best input/output ratio is valued, the number of research publications produced and citations of an academic's work take precedence over what is researched (the content of the papers). Pedagogy is fast in the sense that students are provided with prepackaged materials and pedagogy is likely to become more efficient with the pivot toward online teaching/learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This could result in the lecturer becoming an on-demand worker who delivers products just-in-time for the student. (See Le Grange [25] for a discussion on the uberfication of the university.) All of this constricts opportunities for conversations that complicate and reimagine the concept of sustainability.

Furthermore, the words invoked when academics develop, design and enact curriculum are performative words such as goals, objectives, outcomes, products, achievement, evaluation, assessment, etc. These words all reflect instrumentalism as the guiding premise. When sustainability is configured in terms of these performative words, then it becomes a (pre)defined goal to achieve and something that can be evaluated or assessed. Pedagogy in this instance becomes banal and simply a means to achieve the stated goals/objectives/outcomes. The migration towards online teaching in the contemporary world, and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, might entrench instrumentalism in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, when dominant discourses on sustainability are adopted by universities, such as the adoption of the United Nations SDGs, which are also couched in neoliberal instrumentalist language, then instrumentalism deepens and the discourse on sustainability narrows. Opportunities for sustainability talk that involves critiquing the concept, complicating it and reimagining it become greatly curtailed. Figure 1 below is illustrative of what happens in the contemporary university.

In 2007 Stellenbosch University, a historically white and Afrikaans university, appointed its first Black Vice-Chancellor (VC) Prof. Russel Botman. In his inaugural address he outlined his personal vision for the university based on a pedagogy of hope. This idea was inspired by Paulo Freire's sequel to his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that was entitled *A Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Botman [26] (p. 2) averred that he introduced a "pedagogy of hope" because it demands that democracy be placed on the curriculum and because Freire argued that the needs of the poor should take priority. He Botman's own words: "I felt that by infusing our pedagogical outlook with this kind of hope, we would be able to become not only "significantly different" from our past, but also "significantly better". However, as Botman began serving his first term and consulted with stakeholders of the university his "pedagogy of hope" morphed into what became called the "Hope Project"—pedagogy became a project. At the outset of the project the notion of hope was linked to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). One of the five themes that were derived from the MDGs was 'environmental sustainability' (aligned to MDG 7). At this point there was still an exciting prospect of exploring how Freire's pedagogy of hope might resonate with environmental sustainability, but upon further consultation with stakeholders by the VC, the wording of this theme changed to "Balancing a sustainable environment with a competitive industry" [26] (p. 3). Not only are the two components of the theme antagonistic, but the instrumentalist language of goals and themes was introduced. Moreover, Botman approached the University Council to fund the Hope Project and he was awarded R300 million. However, this funding was to be used to leverage further funding and so much of Botman's first term as Vice-Chancellor was spent meeting with potential funders, including the big US foundations and corporates both inside and outside of South Africa. Pedagogy was placed on the backburner.

Figure 1. "Pedagogy of Hope" morphs into the "Hope Project". Constructed from Botman [26], Botman et al. [27].

I am not suggesting that there was no productive work done in some of the projects funded by the umbrella Hope project, (see Botman et al. [27] for examples of projects funded by the "Hope Project") but I wish to illustrate how a focus on pedagogy became eroded and how the discourse on sustainability became constricted in this neoliberal university. Moreover, the Hope Project became driven by the university's vision to promote the ideal of excellence.

4. Sustainability Higher Education and the University of Beauty

In this section of the article, I explore how sustainability education could be liberated from the strictures of neoliberalism and how we might (re)think a pedagogy that will open up pathways for the becoming of pedagogical lives attuned with sustainability. This, I suggest, might happen when the neoliberal university is reimagined as the "University of Beauty" [17]. For Bearn [17], the University of

Beauty is characterised by the positive affirmation of pointlessness. Bearn [17] imagines the University of Beauty as counter to the contemporary university, which is characterised by the euphemism for performativity that university administrators use: excellence. He offers an alternative conception to the smoothness, efficiency and banality of the neoliberal university. For Bearn [17] beauty is formless, nonrepresentational and pointless. Formlessness does not mean that there is no form, but that there is an indeterminate multiplicity of forms that "can stimulate the playful positive pleasure of the beautiful" [17] (p. 246). He argues that enjoying formlessness is akin to enjoying caressing. In the context of sustainability education, the lecturer invites students to engage in conceptual caressing of the indeterminate multiplicity of forms and representations of sustainability. Bearn [17] avers that caressing is pointless not because it has no point, but because it is involved in countless points—pointlessness in this sense is positive. Moreover, caressing takes time and, as Bearn [17] (p. 244) notes, it is "not for lovers in a hurry . . . there is nothing efficient about it." Conceptually caressing the myriad of forms and representations of sustainability will take time, therefore pedagogy in respect of sustainability should be slow—not be characterised by the efficiency of performativity.

Bearn [17] argues that in order to break through to the other side of representation we need to move toward intensity—towards a beauteous intensity. He points out that intensity is analogous to water from a single source being poured into a turbulent pool producing a multitude of swirls flowing in indeterminate directions. He distinguishes between two approaches to intensification in the University of Beauty: the method of compression that involves increasing intensity by deepening our engagement with one site of investigation and the method of connection or extension where engagement with one site of inquiry is extended to make connections between other sites, projects, etc. In relation to sustainability education, the compression method of intensification could mean reflecting on one's self understanding of sustainability, an intense investigation of a particular place in which sustainability concerns have arisen or a deep study of how sustainability is constructed or practised within a particular discipline. The connection or extension method of intensification could involve increasing one's coefficient of transversality through exploring/invigorating connections between the interlocking domains which Guattari [28] referred to as self, society and environment. It could also be concerned with connecting understandings of sustainability in different disciplines/fields giving rise to interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary understandings of sustainability. Furthermore, it might also involve connecting different places where (un)sustainability issues are being investigated.

There are two other aspects that Bearn [17] discusses in his articulation of the University of Beauty: rhythm and passion. Rhythm in the University of Beauty is of the Messiaen kind. Messiaen (in [12]) regarded rhythmic music as music which disdains repetition, straightforwardness and unequal divisions—free movement and unequal durations are valued. Bearn [17] (p. 252) argues that this notion of rhythm can help to imagine the University of Beauty because "Free beauties keep the mind in playful motion ever off-balance, not sure and stable . . . " In the context of sustainability education, teaching should not be smooth and efficient, but pedagogy should be "rough and rhythmic" [17] (p. 254). In other words, the lecturer should keep classes off balance by inviting critique of settled understanding of sustainability and self and open up opportunities for new understandings of sustainability to be imagined or proliferated by students. Bearn [17] also links passion to rhythm and argues that the rhythm of passion is unpredictable. He writes: "Good teachers are passionate about something and that passion will keep them and their lectures, seminars, and classes off-balance, because the rhythm of passion is unpredictable." The unpredictable rhythm of passion means that passion will disrupt comfortable understandings of sustainability as well as disciplinary comfort. In Figure 2 that follows I describe how some aspects of Bearn's University of Beauty might already be evident in the neoliberal university.

Prior to, during and after the Hope Project, academics at Stellenbosch University who had an interest in sustainability concerns connected with one another because they were passionate about what they did. About a decade ago, in the early stages of their engagement, individual members of all 10 faculties in the university met informally, often for an early morning breakfast or sometimes for dinner, to discuss common concerns and to explore ways in which they could work together. There was no imposed agenda from either the university management or an entity external to the group. The ethics of the group was an immanent one and what became actualised from their engagements emerged from their interactions within one another. Some of the many generative outcomes included: a book on the Green economy; an edited collection on Sustainable Stellenbosch that addresses sustainability in a range of different domains: ethics, culture and heritage, water, food, energy flow, education [29]; a transdisciplinary doctoral programme; a Centre for Complex Systems in Transition (CST), etc. Some members of this groups continue to collaborate with one another in different ways through co-supervision, lecture presentations, internal examining of theses. Some of these members known as the Transdisciplinary Research (TDR) group, have worked in a peri-urban informal settlement outside Stellenbosch known as Ekanini, which developed when people erected shacks on vacant municipal land. Over a period of five years (2011–2016), the TD researchers immersed themselves in the community, did not impose an agenda on the community but used interim solutions reflexively, so as to ensure that the community owned the projects, which also incorporated small sociotechnical experiments that involved using solar energy, improving sanitation and alternative energy use [30].

Although some of the members of the broader group were involved in the funded projects of the umbrella Hope Project, their involvement in sustainability-related projects was not driven by an institutionalised project but a passion for engaging in sustainability higher education (research).

Figure 2. Aspects of Bearn's University of Beauty in the neoliberal university. Constructed from [29,30].

Needless to say, pedagogical space extends beyond the formal lecture venue/classroom. However, how might we further think curriculum and pedagogy in the University of Beauty in ways that will open up pathways for sustainable (re)thinking? If sustainability education is about complicating the concept of sustainability, about being personally reflexive, and about imagining or thinking the concept differently, then curriculum conversations on sustainability need to be complicated. Aoki [31] has argued that conversation is not "chitchat," nor is it a simple exchange of information, because none of these requires "true human presence" (p. 180). Conversations do not conform to predetermined outcomes but, as in the case of improvisational jazz, produce something new and transforms those engaged in the conversation. Curriculum becomes a complicated conversation when we, as pedagogues, complicate students' understanding of the subject they are studying (in this case sustainability). Pinar [32] suggested that such complicated conversations occur when we do not devise "airtight" arguments but provide spaces for students to find their own voices so that they "construct their own understanding of what it means to teach, to study, to become educated" (p. 2)—and in this instance, to construct their own understanding of sustainability (education). Conversations also become complicated when scholars engage with their peers (particularly with those with different histories, beliefs, and ideas), and listen respectfully to them so as to interrogate their own understandings of self and of the field of sustainability (education) in this case. Pinar [32] suggested that complicated conversations are premised on a commitment of scholars to engage in such conversations with their peers, their students and with themselves, and that such a commitment is accompanied by "frank and ongoing self-criticism" (p. 9). Le Grange [33] (p. 7) contends that "frank and ongoing self-criticism is an important dimension of complicated conversations because it mitigates against hierarchical power relations that could impede productive conversations from happening".

Moreover, in the University of Beauty, which is attuned to sustainability, pedagogy is more akin to jazz improvisation than to classical orchestral performance. Le Grange [34] avers that with improvisational jazz, where every musician (student) is a composer, a "mistake" could be a line of flight and produce something new. "In the classroom situation, although the lecturer may be more experienced

and knowledgeable, the educative performance, as in the case with improvisational jazz, is a meshwork of interactions that does not enable one to identify those actions of the teacher/lecturer that cause learning" (p. 1292). What is produced by a pedagogical ensemble that is akin to improvisational jazz is immanently present and moves towards beauteous intensity.

5. Some Parting Thoughts

I have discussed the narrowing discourse of sustainability (education) characteristic of the neoliberal university. Furthermore, the University of Beauty, which is characterized by pointlessness, makes possible the rethinking of sustainability because the concept of sustainability is pointless in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari's [12] figuration of the rhizome is. In the University of Beauty students could participate in rethinking sustainability in different ways: through community-based projects and service learning; through complicated conversations that lecturers initiate; and through pedagogical performances that are imagined differently, analogous to the playing of an improvisational jazz ensemble.

In her invocation of Deleuze and Guattari's [12] notion of a "people-yet-to-come", Hroch [7] points out that they do not presuppose that the pedagogical or the political process of transformation will occur when a people-not-yet-existing (a future people) will take action in the world. For Deleuze and Guattari [12], the people-yet-to-come are those who are already here because they, the people-now-here and the concept of sustainability are in-becoming, just as the rhizome is in-becoming in pointless and unpredictable ways. It is in the becoming of people who are immanently present that sustainability is continuously reimagined. There might of course be moments of territoriality where particular understandings of sustainability (education) motivate actions, but the concept of sustainability—as is the case with the people—does not have fixity. Arendt [35] notes that in times of crises it is the becoming of the young that is most important. In the university it is the becoming of students (people-now-here) where the potential exists for the neoliberal university to become the University of Beauty.

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