

## Book Review

### **The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy - Edited by Arran Stibbe**

Finally we have a book which collects in an accessible format the varied and multi-faceted development of the field of education for sustainability. The challenge and the strength of the book is that of presenting the field from the multiple perspectives of thirty-two authors, selected from a network of theorists and practitioners in the field.

The date of publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* in 1962 has been widely referred to as the beginning of the environmental movement. Yet since then, a constellation of contributions—ranging from the feminist to the post-colonial traditions, has gone deeper to question the modernist and post-industrial model of socio-economic development dominating human societies in the West. The result is what has now become known as the paradigm shift. Drawing on the work of Capra (2000), we are confronted with an epistemological shift in our categories of thought and our ways of knowing the world, from looking at parts in a reductionist sense, to valuing connections and relationships, in an ecological way.

And this is the essence of *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy*. In the introduction to the book, editor Allan Stibbe describes the need for learning approaches which are conducive to a critical and socio-culturally grounded analysis of the Western, reductionist worldview. Indeed the starting point of the book, using Stibbe's words, is not the environmental problems—which are threatening the opportunities for human life on the Earth—but instead “the social, cultural and economic systems that give rise to those problems” (p. 13).

The book unfolds as a series of chapters focussed on particular aspects of everyday experience, such as media communication (Chapters 1, 4), business practices (Chapter 16), material consumption and carbon emissions (Chapters 18 and 20). Chapters are short, on average between six and eight pages, and are characterised by an argumentative and reflective tone designed to invite the readers to critically explore common behaviours and values by means of suggested exercises. For example, in Chapter 1, Greg Garrard provides some practical questions for inquiring into the basis of our communication system. This activity is aimed at revealing the sources of cultural conditioning which shape the beliefs we hold about ourselves, our real and perceived needs and how we can interact with the world. According to Greg Garrard, this kind of interrogation is key to the acquisition of sustainability literacy. By means of critical reflection we can develop awareness of the dangers of consumerism which depletes the Earth's natural resources. This theme is further considered by Paul Maiteny in Chapter 26 '*Finding meaning without consuming*' in which the author argues for the practice of personal reflection and interrogation of one's own needs and desires in order to exclude wasteful behaviours as quick solutions.

The handbook as a whole, however, is not designed to provide a coherent treatise on sustainability literacy. Chapters tend to be self-contained in content and style, ranging from descriptions and exemplifications of sustainable approaches to production processes (e.g. Chapter 21 on design technology) to chapters dealing with philosophical aspects of sustainability literacy (i.e. Chapter 10 and 12). For example Stephen Harding (Chapter 12 *Gaia Awareness*) presents the readers with a theory that has, at its core, an image of the Earth as a nourishing mother, a place to be rooted into

and to belong. This approach moves away from the classical, Cartesian separation of subject and object, in order to value states of positive, emotional connection to the Earth and to deepen awareness of the evolutionary and ecological connections linking humanity to the Earth.

Connections can be found throughout the book and amongst the different chapters but apart from the most obvious, content based linkages which have used by the editor to organise the sequence of chapters, conceptual and philosophically-based connections are left to the reader to draw out on their own.

For such reasons, the handbook is not a core text for academic inquiry. For a reader and a scholar interested in the field, the handbook operates at his best as a *tool* for action — in the realm of personal reflection and pedagogical practice. The exercises given at the end of each chapter can be a useful resource to use with students for the purpose of drawing out the multiplicity of connections that exist between topics and ideas. Only occasionally do the authors report on their own experiences of using the activities in a way which would be helpful for other practitioners. Hence the handbook is an inspiring resource which can be best used in connection with other resources of a more organised nature and as part of an educational approach which values collective, reflective and participatory inquiry. The vision is an enticing one: to root sustainability literacy into the very fabric of social and ecological relationships of our lives.

## **References**

Capra, F. (2000) *The web of life*. New York: Harper Collins.

Laura Colucci-Gray (PhD) is a lecturer in Science and Sustainability Education at Aberdeen University (UK) and she is a member of the Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Sustainability based at Turin University, Italy. Her research is concerned with the use of participatory methodologies for Sustainability Education.