

# ACCELERATING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH PLACED-BASED LEARNING

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Founded in 1999, the Sustainability Institute is an international living and learning centre, registered as a non-profit trust. It designs and runs learning experiences for transformative education, including a preschool, primary school, youth centre, learning farm, and short courses. The Sustainability Institute offers knowledge, skills and a physical space for educational experiences anchored in sustainability. Its expertise is in designing transformative learning experiences for all ages, and advisory and consulting services under themes of sustainable food systems, sustainable organisations, sustainable communities, and transformative learning for sustainability. Vanessa von der Heyde is the Managing Director of the Sustainability Institute's programmes, and Jeremy Doyle is an independent researcher and MPhil candidate at Stellenbosch University Centre for Sustainability Transitions.

Today, society faces arguably its greatest challenge: tackling the sustainability crisis in the face of worsening social and racial inequalities. We need new ways of thinking, new ways of understanding the challenge and how we might approach it; even unlearning what we already know. At the Sustainability Institute, we see our role as helping to accelerate this response. Situated just outside Stellenbosch in the Western Cape, South Africa, our vision led to the establishment of a mixed-income and mixed-race ecovillage in which people from different walks of life could choose to live and work together as a community, and practice development in which both people and the natural environment would flourish. With over two decades of lived experience, we explore fundamentally different ways of living, learning, and working, often in collaboration with universities, NGOs, development agencies, farms, corporates, and others. In this article, we reflect on the challenge for higher education in the twenty-first century, explore the role of place-based learning, and outline three examples to illustrate our recent work, demonstrating how learning that happens in a physical environment can bridge the gap between theory and practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions have the responsibility of preparing a generation of capable, skilled people who can contribute to society. Today, society faces arguably its greatest challenge: tackling the sustainability crisis in the face of worsening social and racial inequalities. At the Sustainability Institute, we see our role as helping to accelerate this response by restoring broken connections. We integrate abstract concepts with practice, theories with action, learners with communities. We aim to restore education of mind, body and soul, through whole-being learning experiences. We bring together disparate disciplines that often struggle to engage with each other. And we aim to restore connections between people and the living world we are part of. Indeed, we believe that separation is a fundamental part of the problem, and that seeing the world as an interconnected web of life – an understanding long held by many indigenous knowledge communities and practices – is central to the work of restoring healthy relationships between people and this planet we call home.



## HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Twenty-two years ago, when the Sustainability Institute Trust was established, the notion of sustainability was often associated with what could be done: reducing waste, switching to cleaner forms of energy, or recycling. Today, it is increasingly clear that these actions, while critical, are not enough. As David Orr writes, *“the crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perception, and values – hence, it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions, and values. It is an educational challenge.”*<sup>1</sup>

A crisis of mind calls for new ways of thinking, new ways of knowing, new ways of understanding the challenge we face and how we might approach it; even unlearning what we already know. Teaching sustainability can no longer be an add-on, an afterthought, a module in a programme. We believe it must be embedded; endeavouring to shift the way we think, how we perceive the world, and how we approach problems.

In the global South, there is an added dimension for educators: many of the dominant learning paradigms shaping today’s higher education programmes emerged in the industrialising nations of the global North. That is, they were shaped by a certain context. But knowledge exists in many places and takes many forms, and the developmental context of the global South is quite different. We must account for deep cultural, geographical, and historical differences, and move forward in the face of resource scarcity and rising costs, in sharp contrast with the era of resource abundance and cheap energy of the past two hundred years.

In principle, many higher learning institutions are already deeply committed to transformative learning. Universities, for example, are home to many creative and radical thinkers who are at the forefront of innovation in education.

Yet the challenge for universities – as it is with any large institution – is a structural inertia that makes it difficult to achieve innovation at both scale and pace. Arguably, the scale of the challenges that we face as a global society now require just that: wide-scale innovation at pace.

Here, we believe the Sustainability Institute has a critical role to play. As a small organisation independent of the constraints faced by many higher learning institutions, we act as a catalyst for higher learning institutions, development agencies, and others who are embedding sustainability into their learning programmes.

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## OUR ROLE: A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

Our story began in Lynedoch, a small village in the Western Cape, South Africa. Our vision was to establish a mixed-income and mixed-race ecovillage in which people from different walks of life could choose to live and work together as a community. We asked ourselves how we could practice development in which both people and the natural environment would flourish, accounting for South Africa’s specific context and challenges. We started by rehabilitating the degraded land around the village school with indigenous species, experimenting with ecologically intelligent and low carbon buildings, implementing a sustainable wastewater treatment system, and planting a community vegetable garden.

Over time, our work led to a collaboration with Stellenbosch University, through which we support their undergraduate and postgraduate diploma in sustainable development. We facilitate a variety of transformative non-degree short courses, including immersive learning journeys in other countries. Collaboration with learners and researchers led to the launch of several projects, such as a community-owned solar energy project.

Today, the Sustainability Institute helps a broad range of institutions embed sustainability into their learning programmes. We collaborate with universities, NGOs, development agencies, farms, corporates, and others to explore and implement fundamentally different ways of living, learning, and working that bring forth more equitable and generative futures.

Our work is rooted in principles of co-design, experimentation, and process over form. A central component of the Sustainability Institute’s approach is an emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things. Our work is deeply influenced by complexity and systems thinking, and thus we incorporate elements of these concepts in the design of our programs.

## OUR APPROACH: PLACE-BASED LEARNING

What sets the Sustainability Institute apart is that learning takes place in a physical environment that bridges the gap between theory and practice. This approach to learning through being embedded in a real-life environment – often referred to as place-based learning – allows us to create and facilitate learning experiences that are fundamentally different to traditional, class-based environments. Place-based learning has several important aspects.

First, ideas can be radical, experimental, yet grounded. We can, for example, theorise about what a socially and

<sup>1</sup> David Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*, 1994.





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environmentally just transition might look like for South Africa's food system. In practice, local, ethically sourced, organic food and coffee for our on-site café is unaffordable for many of our learners and most of the staff. Navigating these contradictions with honesty and humility, while attempting to reconcile them, is a core part of learning for both us and learners.

Second, learning is tangible. Embedded in the broader community of Lynedoch and built over time to integrate with the natural environment around it, the ecovillage aims to be a microcosm of sustainable living in practice. Continuing with the example of the food system, learners might spend time planting and harvesting vegetables from our garden, preparing meals in our kitchen, and sorting and recycling waste. This 'whole body' experience connects abstract concepts with practical actions, often triggering entirely novel ideas.

Third, there is space for reconnection between specialised schools of thought, between conventional and other forms of knowledge. Contextual, indigenous knowledge, rooted in place, comes into its own. One cannot understand a place fully without considering its geography, its history, its social dynamics, its ecology, how its economy is structured, how it is governed, what technologies it benefits from, and so on. All these aspects create opportunities for sharing across disciplines, as each programme comes with a unique group of learners with diverse backgrounds, learning objectives, questions, and constraints.

Sustainability education remains difficult work. It involves trial and error. It is far easier to speak about than to achieve in practice. In our role as an independent non-profit trust, we can be nimble, experimental, even radical, but being grounded in a physical place and community holds us to account in terms of rigour and purpose.

## OUR LEARNING PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE

The following three examples illustrate our recent work and help bring elements of our learning philosophy to life:

### FOSTERING A RELATIONAL WORLDVIEW WITH THE AGENCE FRANÇAISE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT (AFD)

As Daniel Christian Wahl<sup>2</sup> writes, "*sustainability is not a destination, it is a journey*". We agree, and for this reason we believe dwelling on questions is important. Jumping too quickly to find the answers takes the unnecessary risk that we continue to perpetuate the behaviours and mindsets that have created the world we want to leave behind.

This idea is central to the Biodiversity Partners Programme, a coordinated effort between the Agence Française de Développement Campus (AFD Campus) and the Sustainability Institute. The programme is aimed at pro-nature entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs in Southern Africa. Participants are encouraged to integrate a deeper understanding of complexity and biodiversity into their innovations, business models, and theories of change, using their own project or business venture as a focal point for learning. Topics include deep ecology, indigenous knowledge, and systems thinking.

Many participants describe how they come to view their project not as an isolated effort, but as part of a network of relationships embedded in a greater system. For example, one participant shared how they realised that by-products from maize processing could be used as an input in the production process rather than going to waste. We encourage entrepreneurs to consider the potential impact of their project on a wider range of stakeholders and on the natural world. As another participant describes it, "*the programme gave me a different lens on how I view biodiversity and my own role in nurturing it*". For many, it is about "*giving a new language*" to what is often taken for granted: our dependence on nature, and the complexity of our relationship with it.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Christian Wahl is a biologist, notably on the advisory councils of Ecosystems Restoration Camps, Commonland and Future Planet Europe.



## ANIMATING DEGREE PROGRAMMES WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH<sup>3</sup>



The Sustainability Institute collaborates with the University of Stellenbosch on two of their degree programmes: the postgraduate diploma in Sustainable Development (since 2003) and the undergraduate Diploma in Sustainable Development (since 2018). Both blend influences from environmental and social sciences to help learners understand the complexity of the significant societal challenges we face and provide them with a variety of tools and skills to address these.

Through our involvement in these degree programmes, we aim to facilitate experiences that stimulate not just the mind, but connect to heart, body, and soul. We do this by creating space for reflection and deep connection with others, with shared pasts, and with desired futures. In parallel with academic writing, these programmes encourage learners to express themselves via multiple creative forms and styles including poetry, artwork, podcasts, storytelling, drama, and dance. As the Dalai Lama reflected on modern education “*we seem to be very good at educating the mind but not the heart.*” Every day starts with *ilima*<sup>4</sup>, a practical activity such as working in the food gardens, preparing meals or cleaning, a way for learners to give back to the community in which their learning is taking place. A core component of each assignment is a journal, building critical reflexivity into learners’ academic work and helping draw out inner assumptions and values.

Being physically present within the practice hub offered by the Sustainability Institute is a core part of the learning experience that makes these degree programmes so unique and transformative. Theoretical concepts are linked to practical examples and experiences. For example, learners studying the dangers of alien vegetation will spend time in our woodland, observing the way the alien grass encroaches on indigenous tree and shrubs, and seeing how we are trying to combat this (at the moment we are trying to do so with the help of six friendly pigs). We think this type of collaboration between universities and NGOs can create sustainability education programmes that are cutting-edge at the global level.

<sup>3</sup> Undergraduate and postgraduate diplomas in Sustainable Development are administered and owned by Stellenbosch University. For more information see: <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/economy/sp/degree-programmes/undergraduate-degrees/diploma-in-sustainable-development> [Undergraduate Diploma] and <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/economy/sp/degree-programmes/postgraduate-degrees/post-graduate-diploma-in-sustainable-development> [Postgraduate Diploma].

<sup>4</sup> *Ilima* is an isiXhosa term for collective action to tackle common challenges and build social capital.

## PROMOTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE WITH SPIER WINE FARM

In 2019, we started the Living Soils Community Learning Farm in collaboration with Spier Wine Farm, a project that aims to increase food security in the Lynedoch Valley while simultaneously training young farmers in ecologically regenerative agriculture. Interns learn practical farming methods as well as farming management, administration, and entrepreneurial skills. A youth programme aims to rebuild a sense of cultural heritage and ownership when it comes to food growing that has been lost over generations of association with low paid work and poor treatment in the commercial farming industry.

Here, we ensure other voices are present in learning beyond conventional, codified knowledge. Facilitators include those with a deep understanding of indigenous vegetation and food, and who can help bring to life ‘ways of knowing’ in parallel with conventional farming techniques. As one facilitator describes, “*traditional knowledge is not something from the past, but rather something that is a living part of our present and future.*” Living Soils is a practical effort not only to restore food security, but in recognition that new patterns of thinking and acting are urgently needed to address a crisis rooted in old patterns. The food industry is one such system where the need for new alternatives is clear, and where there is still so much work to be done.

Transformative learning is a lifelong process. And sustainability education doesn’t offer neat solutions. Instead, learners probably leave with more questions than they had when they arrived, which can be disorienting. A one-week immersion might give you a glimpse into another way of seeing the world, but it is easy to return to the world from which you came. The importance of a ‘tribe’ to support learners beyond their experience cannot be overstated.

Our work must therefore catalyse sustained action in a diverse group of people so that their knowledge is applied in new ways, in their unique contexts, in ways that help solve the crisis as opposed to reinforcing it. Whilst theoretical insights deepen and inform our practice, we believe that it is critical for learners to additionally have real agency, valuable skills, and the right attitude to activate change for a more sustainable world. Learning that is place based, action oriented, embedded in nature, reflective, of mind, body, and soul, and community-led is central to this work. It is a daunting and exciting challenge for higher education in the twenty-first century.

