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Deep learning for a sustainability mindset

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ABSTRACT

While ‘sustainability’ in management education is mostly addressed from a technical perspective, the emotional and ‘being’ aspects can be key for creating a new mindset. In this paper the authors build on a conceptual model for developing a sustainability mindset, and provide an example of how this was applied in the design of an undergraduate course on *Managing Multinationals*, at Oulu Business School, the University of Oulu, Finland. Addressing the knowledge, systems thinking, emotional aspects, the tacit paradigms and the values we adhere to, students were led on a journey of discovery that created deep learning. This paper shows how the model for developing a sustainability mindset can be adapted and tailored to specific pedagogical contexts.

1. Introduction

How can educators engage students in sustainability action? With increasing global awareness about the planetary challenges that disrupt our ecosystem, and with it, life as we knew it, it could be expected that more individuals would decide to change their consumption habits, making voluntary changes in their lifestyle, or orienting their professional activity towards betterment of our planet.

In order for these individual changes to happen at the required speed and scope, several initiatives seek to motivate individuals towards much needed social or environmental actions, such as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals launched in 2015 by the United Nations Global Compact. Signed by the 193 member states, and announced as the most important agenda for the following 15 years, they have been put in front of business, global asset managers, non-profit organizations, policy makers and governments around the world. The educational sector has also been invited to champion the sustainability agenda, through UNESCO, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). Multiple corporations, NGOs and grassroots organizations have also stepped up to promote action to address the many planetary challenges.

Thinking of scaling and accelerating change, how can educators foster engagement and develop a sustainability mindset? [Dobson \(2007\)](#) argues that the formal educational system is an appropriate arena to promote sustainability because it may influence students' worldviews and attitudes towards sustainability and contribute to a more profound social change ([Setó-Pamies & Papaioikonomou, 2016](#)). Universities that adopted the PRME principles have been seeking for ways to develop management graduates with sustainability leadership capabilities ([Young & Nagpal, 2013](#)). This paper builds on related studies proposing systemic approaches to sustainability education ([Sterling, 2003](#); [Van Lopik, 2013](#)), the exploration of assumptions and values for a paradigmatic shift ([Adkins, Gentile, Ingols, & Trefalt, 2012](#); [Fang, Kang, & Liu, 2004](#); [Kearney, 1984](#); [Kuhn & Hacking, 2012](#); [Mezirow, 1994](#); [Scharmer & Hub, 2010](#); [Yeager & Dweck, 2012](#)), and the consideration of purpose, meaning, and one-ness ([Delbecq, 2008](#); [Doppelt, 2012](#); [Krishnan, 2008](#); [Neal, 2008](#); [Zohar, 2012](#)), including the recently published special issue on the UN Global Compact's PRME in the *International*

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Journal of Management Education (Parkes, Buono, & Howaidy, 2017). Furthermore the authors introduce the concept of the sustainability mindset and its elements (Rimanoczy, 2010), advocating for *deep learning* as a more holistic approach to learning and teaching sustainability (Cotton & Alcock, 2012) which engages individuals by addressing a topic through their intellect, their emotions and their values.

This paper focuses on an instrumental level in education for sustainability, i.e. methods and methodologies for learning sustainability in business (Setó-Pamies & Papaoikonomou, 2016). The authors build on the conceptual model for a sustainability mindset developed to guide educators in selecting contents and pedagogical approaches (Kassel, Rimanoczy, & Mitchell, 2016). Building on that foundation, an example is provided of an undergraduate course on *Managing Multinationals* at Oulu Business School, the University of Oulu, Finland. The course instructor designed the course particularly to address current ecoliteracy-related knowledge on MNC management challenges, prompting systems thinking, introducing emotional aspects, and exploring the tacit paradigms and values of the students, as they navigate a path of discovery that creates deep learning.

Our study is an empirical contribution to the literature discussing pedagogies for responsible management education, emphasizing the flexibility of the sustainability mindset model. In a practical way, it shows how a holistic pedagogy can develop a new mindset (Dyllick, 2015; Muff et al., 2013).

2. Exploring unusual leaders' mindset

The responsibility of corporations in the social and environmental impact of their operation is increasingly seen as an important condition of doing business (Dunphy, Benn, & Griffiths, 2003; Shrivastava, 1995, 2010). The statement of a 6 trillion dollar asset management CEO, Larry Fink from Blackrock,¹ calls for corporations to declare their short and long term impact on the environment and society as the 'new normal' for doing business. It has become a strategic issue and even close to a liability if not considered.

This said, certainly some business leaders engage passionately in initiatives that change how their organization operates, and pioneer a new way of thinking, seeking to improve their social or environmental footprint. However, it has been unclear what their motivations are (Sharma, 2002; Visser & Crane, 2010). What triggers cause them to go the unusual path, facing disbelief, uncertainty and puzzled colleagues or employees? This is a question that has been intriguing educators, as they seek to be more effective in engaging their students in sustainability issues. If we identify the nature of those triggers, the possibility opens to intentionally develop sustainability minded individuals by adding certain contents into management courses.

Recently, studies have addressed this question in light of different approaches to teaching and learning (Cullen, 2017; Ortiz & Huber-Heim, 2017). Klapper and Farber (2016), for example, emphasize the lasting imprint that an experiential learning approach has on students' entrepreneurial mindset. Lackeus (2014), in a report on an entrepreneurship course, causally links the experience of working in a team, interaction with the outside world, uncertainty and ambiguity, with the formation of higher levels of self-insight, entrepreneurial identity, self-efficacy, and tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity. The inclusion of more than cognitive aspects in creating deeper learning experiences has been brought forth by Shrivastava (2010) and Burga, Leblanc, and Rezanian (2017). Shrivastava (2010) advocated for a holistic, passion-guided pedagogy for sustainability which pays equal attention to the cognitive, physical and emotional components of teaching.

Several scholars have observed that decision making requires ethical sensitivity and awareness of a given value system, in addition to technical skills, going from values-neutral to a values-driven stance (Gentile, 2010; Kelley & Nahser, 2014). "Ethical sensitivity in action has to go well beyond creating ethical awareness of issues, it needs the chance to practice ("rehearse") for values-driven action in the context of practical management decisions. Only when students learn to move between the distanced, external stance of analytical thinking – the third person view – and the first and second person points of view, from which they have to act when solving real problems, will they have the chance to develop personal character and integrity." (Dyllick, 2015, p. 20).

Building on a holistic pedagogy for sustainability, we aim to shed light on the triggers for lasting, sustainable behavior of business graduates. Underlying to our endeavor is work by Rimanoczy (2010, 2013) which created understanding of the thinking and motivations of business leaders championing sustainability initiatives in their rather traditional corporations; the intention was to identify some aspects that could be intentionally developed in a new generation of leaders (Rimanoczy, 2010).

Sixteen business leaders from different industrial areas were studied to understand what information had played a role in their sustainability-engaged actions, what factors contributed to their 'readiness' to act, and what emotional, ethical, and spiritual elements played a role in the transformation of their worldview. From a large number of factors, the aspects that could be intentionally developed were extracted and classified as they naturally fell into two clusters, as shown in Table 1: the systemic and innovative thinking dimensions (how they thought, the lenses through which they interpreted data and facts) (Atwater, Kannan, & Stephen, 2008), and the being dimension (their personal values, aspects related to purpose, life mission, sense of transcendence and making a difference).

The combination of the elements was called "sustainability mindset", defined as a way of thinking and being that results from a broad understanding of the ecosystem's manifestations, from social sensitivity, as well as an introspective focus on one's personal values and higher self, and finds its expression in actions for the greater good of the whole. (Kassel et al., 2016).

A sequence was also noted that started with realizing the seriousness of certain social or environmental aspects, but not just as distant facts: the leaders reflected on what their personal contribution was to those problems. This created moments of introspection and revision of their paradigms, with an emotional experience of cognitive dissonance: they realized that while they were ethical

¹ <https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/en-us/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter>.

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