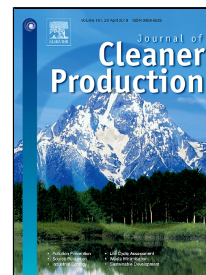


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The power of art to foster systems thinking, one of the key competencies of education for sustainable development

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Highlights

- The paper discusses the relevance of art in management education to learn about sustainable development.
- Paintings were used in class to foster the systems thinking competency.
- Art in class improves the understanding of concepts in relation with sustainability and encourages critical reflection and creative thinking.
- Paintings act as a vehicle to nurture holistic learning, integrating the head and the heart.
- Further research could explore other art types and concepts, or active use of art.

Abstract

Systems thinking is one of the most difficult competencies for students to acquire. Nevertheless it is one of the key competencies of education for sustainable development. Although there is relatively little research available on the link between didactic approaches and sustainability competencies, it is clear that alternative ways of teaching, such as project based learning and multi-perspective and interdisciplinary thinking and working are more effective for acquiring this competency. In this paper we explore the power of art as a way to foster systems thinking and to distinguish between different ways of thinking about sustainability. We selected two paintings, *Les Jours Gigantesques* by René Magritte and *Sky and Water II* by Maurits Escher, to explain a top-down and bottom-up approach to sustainability. The paper discusses how business students respond to art in a course on corporate social responsibility and how it helps them to understand the meaning of systems thinking. The findings reveal that these paintings are relevant for improving the comprehension of concepts related to sustainability. Moreover, they add an extra dimension to the cognitive understanding of systems thinking, i.e. enriching the whole person, reinforcing critical and creative thinking skills.

Key Concepts: Systems thinking; sustainable development; art; management education, visual literacy.

1. Introduction

"Behaviour change requires, among other factors, emotional engagement and passionate commitment. Education for sustainability needs to seriously contend with this basic human fact. Cognitive understanding alone is not sufficient; managers and students need holistic, physical and emotional engagement with sustainability issues." (Shrivastava, 2010: 433)

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