Civic Action for Sustainable Futures: What Role for Adult Environmental Education?

Vincent Caruana

Abstract

The paper draws on research conducted by the author in part fulfilment of his PhD research, submitted in December 2013. The main aim of this research was to identify salient situations that enable participatory action as well as create barriers to the transition towards sustainability and to identify key conditions for Adult Environmental Education that would sensitise and mobilise sustained civic action for sustainable development. The research methodology adopted a case study approach—using four case studies across the Mediterranean geographic territory—using multiple sources of data gathering as appropriate to the different contexts of the case studies chosen and as permitted by practical considerations. The study evidences the power of the case studies to reframe and critically challenge hegemonic core beliefs. With inspiring leadership and a real commitment to a mental mode that embraces citizen mobilisation and new spaces for conversations, both CSOs and local institutions can be a positive force towards sustainable solutions at a local level. Adult Environmental Educators and Education for Sustainable Development practitioners need to re-define their roles—in particular their mentorship role and leadership training in addressing the sustainability transition.

V. Caruana (✉)
Centre for Environmental Education and Research, University of Malta, Msida, Malta
e-mail: censu.caruana@um.edu.mt

1   Introduction

The main aim of the author's doctoral thesis was to identify salient situations that enable participatory action as well as create barriers to the transition towards sustainability and to identify key conditions for Adult Environmental Education that would sensitise and mobilise sustained civic action for sustainable development. The research questions were classified under three major headings: Context as pertaining to an ever changing glocal world, mindsets and paradigms; Participation issues; and Educational processes.

The research methodology adopted a case study approach using multiple sources of data gathering as appropriate to the different contexts of the case studies chosen and as permitted by practical considerations. Four case studies were chosen through convenience within the Mediterranean geographic territory: an Intentional Community in Malta; a Fair Trade Network in Egypt; and two Local Agenda 21 processes: one in Modena (Italy) and one in Bethlehem (Palestine). The results were evaluated and analysed against the objectives of this research and narrated in a non-technical language that highlighted the specificity of each case study and identified themes, patterns and commonalities.

As Kjorven (2003) remarks, change requires bold political action both in the North and in the South, while education can bring us closer to realizing our grand hopes for the future by preparing the ground for such political action. Yet what is effective and not still remains somewhat elusive. The author's endeavour to engage in the four case studies, considered by peers as being examples of good practice, was to get closer to the elusive search for effectiveness. In drawing up his conclusions he freed himself from the above mentioned major headings used throughout all chapters to outline more all-encompassing strands that emanated from the analysis of the data gathered. This paper draws heavily on these concluding reflections in an attempt to connect some of the dots that can help accelerate the process towards a better common future, while contextualising the research into a wider framework of transformative learning.

These reflections capitalise on the learning from the case studies examined and help charter the unknown terrain referred to by Jickling and Wals (2012). They define a number of options for taking the sustainability transition forward, in particular how more effective non-formal Environmental Education may help overcome some of the key obstacles to greater citizen engagement in sustainable development and promote local choices that carry a societal as well as a global message. They are intended to provide some guidelines to assist educators in addressing the sustainability transition together with interacting groups of envisioning citizens in a locally appropriate manner and to guide the re-imagining of education that asks of us (as Environmental Educators and Educators for Sustainable development) to explore unknown terrain.

2   Infinite Solutions

The variety of the case studies explored reflect a variety of responses available in the transition towards sustainability, which is why in Education for Sustainable Development the talk is often about infinite solutions rather than searching for a solution. However, as a girl participating in the Maastricht 2002 European Global Education Congress remarked, the world is too large to be moved from one point— we need a network to make changes (O'Loughline and Wegimont 2003). Perhaps this is the result of remnants of the dominant paradigm, so well captured by McTaggart (2011), in the foreword to her book, *The Bond*:

> For centuries, Western science and many Western cultures have taught us to think of ourselves as individuals. But today, a revolutionary new understanding is emerging from the laboratories of the most cutting-edge physicists, biologists, and psychologists: What matters is not the isolated entity, **but the space between things**, the relationship of things.

This research adds evidence to what McTaggart is discovering through her extensive research, this time from a completely different angle: a case study approach within the social sciences. The implications are many and *ecological identity*, pioneered so beautifully by Thomashow (1995), takes a new and forefront significance in the efforts and endeavours of adult environmental educators. He directs environmental educators to "*connect their inner voices with understanding of ecology, community, and citizenship*" (p.xiii).

Freire emphasized revolution not as a starting point or an end point, but rather as a process in our daily life (Darder 2013). The author's doctoral research was a peek within the daily life of such revolutionary processes. In each case there was a good dose of touching the lives of those that were the most vulnerable—whether through modern technologies such as Geographical Information Systems, through fairer trade, through a forum on the alternative economy or through permaculture principles and pesticide free farming.

Each case study illustrated a different way of standing against injustice as a long term process. Even where supported by a short term process, such as the three-year funded project which kick started the Local Agenda 21 called Bethlehem 21, the action plan was still over 20 years. These projects served as a reminder that short term interventions, either by do-gooders or by outside *experts* with no roots in the territory, lack the continuity necessary for what is essentially a long term process. Of course short term interventions can be contextualised within long term programmes, but here the emphasis was on the process of getting people together, of owning their destiny and of engaging in the process, the emancipatory process of the emerging paradigm, still with no clear form, but with the *double-challenge* of social justice and the preservation of the environment at its core.

3   Country Contexts

One important strand that emerged from the analysis of the country contexts and the case studies is the role of history in conditioning the various paradigms of development and the need for adult educators to engage at this level and to produce local culturally appropriate guidelines for good practice. Specific skills to work effectively with others, such as those to do with conflict resolution, decision-making, community leadership and problem resolution, emerged as important components in any structured inputs in community processes for a better environment. Another emerging issue was the provision of open spaces for reflective thinking, participatory democracy, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and networking for effective action (World Social Forum 2001).

Students often tend to misunderstand case studies, in that sometimes they are too eager to transfer the benefits emerging from one case study to other contexts, perhaps forgetting that the case study was a success because it was the result of the creation of knowledge and intelligence from a process that belongs to the people involved and the context in question. Yet there is another pitfall in this reasoning: the rendering of passiveness, i.e. being presented with readymade solutions to implement without questioning. This in itself is anti-pedagogic and potentially dangerous, especially if those presenting the solution have their own hidden agendas. Since Tbilisi (UNESCO 1977), Environmental Education was defined as an active learning process—this can never be rendered passive—but rather take life with all its complexities and ambiguities.

4   Impact

Globally there seems to be some concern on the impacts of the various adjectival educations on individuals and the wider community. In some areas, such as Environmental Education and Global/Development Education, most impact assessments have been conducted in schools. Further research in the area is needed, in particular in the adult, youth and community sectors. According to Pedrazzini (2012) individuals exposed to Global Education, develop an outward-looking and inclusive attitude and a more positive and sensitive approach to daily life. Pedrazzini (2012) adds that at the local scale it contributes to shaping more sustainable and diversity-respectful societies.

However, little focus has been given overall to which impacts one needs to study. For example, the Fair Trade Egypt case study indicated conclusively the positive benefits and therefore impact of Fair Trade on the livelihoods of disadvantaged producers. Such a qualitative impact assessment does not assess the impact of any Development Education programme, but does provide a tool for Development Educators. By focusing on the impact of examples of good practice as another possibility to the educational processes of adjectival educations, educators will automatically be equipped with new tools to enhance their work.

Each case study demonstrated the various transdisciplinary efforts of silent stakeholders in creating a better world—a world which increasingly requires culturally and ecologically sensitive responses. In trying to extrapolate the implications of observing such change agents on the ground for the initial and on-going formation of educators, the author cannot but feel humbled. Each situation presented the amazing and pioneering work of colleagues and fellow change agents in bringing about social justice and peace and in advancing Education for Sustainable Development in a mostly informal or non-formal setting. This in itself is motivating.

5   A Reasonable Revolution

In an Open Letter to the green movements, Secrett (2011) asks what more can NGOs do to help humanity out of the mess we are in? He surmises that tactics based on protest and outrages are not working and suggests going from the defensive to the offensive, sparking a reasonable revolution. The case studies documented are a chronicle of leaders, perhaps not famous but respected, who were at the forefront of a reasonable revolution in their daily lives and communities. Again what are the implications for Education for Sustainable Development courses?

Viewing the four cases studies from a distance, with perhaps the exception of the Malta case study, there was too much of the cognitive and too little of the other spaces—namely mind, heart, and spirit in the explicit discourse of the interviewees. Is this is in itself strengthening the problem in that the inherent imbalance is not challenged?

A core strand of Environmental Education is what we call Values Clarification, which essentially is about challenging ourselves so that our behaviour is more coherent with our stated values. Of course each and every person is himself or herself responsible for his or her behaviour and we cannot force political engagement on anyone. Yet what Modena and Bethlehem were able to do was to start the right conversations in official processes. The same can be said regarding Fair Trade Egypt, which initiated a new discourse that jars with the mainstream discourse of trade. Regarding the Malta case study, perhaps one can only appreciate its radicalism when one takes into consideration the conservativeness of Maltese society and the way not only were they were able to start a new conversation—too new for the Church structures to actually grasp and too innovative for the planning authority to comprehend—and also manage to move through and implement it.

6   Beyond Project Cycle Management

On a global level, Agenda 21 has had limited impact and spread. Projects did try to make up for this failure, as in the case of Bethlehem 21. However this reflected more the good will of the then current mayors and the foresight of the coordinating NGO rather than a broad commitment to the idea. What happens when the project

cycle ends? How can we promote less dependency on funding and short term projects? What about long term programmes as opposed to short term projects? What about the sustainability of the projects beyond their life cycle? An issue to deal with, that requires further reflection, is the day to day reality the educator is faced with: the quality-quantity nexus within a fast-slow world nexus. The issue of time, of wanting results fast, often within project established time frames, has overall been ignored in most discourses that took place under the auspices of the Decade. Perhaps this has been considered as requiring too much of a paradigm shift to put as a central concern. Yet clearly it comes as a stumbling block to progress— even within the most successful of initiatives.

7   The Power of Community

In each case-study, but in particular in the Malta and Egypt one, which were less hindered by official protocols, the author could clearly discern the community empowerment as a dialectical process involving the individuals and the community, based on the responsibilities individuals have towards themselves and those they come in contact with. Yet even in the Bethlehem and Modena case study, the author could share the concerns of the interviewees in dedicating so much energy to get people together, to understand face to face that the concerns of the individual are also to be taken into account in a dialectical process of the concerns of those they come in contact with, the frustrations expressed when people still consider the municipality as the door to knock if one needs a job. Of course this is no criticism of knocking the doors as when one needs a job, it is often about survival and one tries out every door to keep up the pun. But rather perhaps that due to the hegemony of the dominant paradigm it is still often hard to understand the power of community solutions. The two case studies in Bethlehem and Modena do bring out the other dialectical relationship between authority and freedom and the way—at a municipality level—the two communities tried to live this process within the tensions of an Agenda 21, in particular the re-definition of the relationships between citizens and authorities.

8   Leadership

The author's journey over the four case studies highlighted something which was not sought out explicitly during the field-work conducted, but which came out forcefully in each and every case study. Each case study had its own successes due to having leaders dedicated to socially just and community empowerment. The data collection chronicled how the leaders in each case study waded their project through various obstacles to arrive where they arrived, drawing lessons not to be rigid and to adapt according to need rather than stick religiously to original plans.

Furthermore, their discourse, though often not explicit, was a discourse of love. It was the great Paolo Freire, who in an education hegemonic system built on valuing the cognitive over the heart, had the guts to talk about *pedagogy of love*. Interestingly enough the author now considers these leaders to be his friends. Perhaps *friendship studies* is a missing link of Education for Sustainable Development, and Education for Sustainable Development is actually an Education in Human Relations. Perhaps it is too political. It was Derrida (2005) who exclaimed that the future of the political becomes the future of friends, "*which, furthermore, bind together, in their very essence, friendship and democracy* (p.198)". The author's itinerary over the years in his research and other experiences has led him to conclude that the human element of relations and lovability came out too often to be a coincidence. It is science, yet not scientific in the sense that the language of love is left outside of the realm of science. In fact, the key people and main contact points within each case study earned the author's admiration for their moral commitment in their leadership roles, aware of the huge tasks faced working in a dominant paradigm which creates inequalities and the destruction of the environment. As Freire (1998) claims, "*human existence is, in fact, a radical and profound tension between good and evil, between dignity and indignity, between decency and indecency, between the beauty and ugliness of the world.*" (p.53).

9   Mentorship

Darder (2013) so ably highlighted the role of critical leadership: "*to have an uncompromising commitment to the empowerment and self-determination of the most disenfranchised*" (p.16). The author witnessed this most strongly in Palestine where it became evident to him that it takes guts to take leadership roles in such situations; to stay close to the people and together with them ask "Why?"—when that is exactly the question which an oppressing order will do all to stop you from asking. This led the author to strengthen his belief in mentorship as a necessary role for the adult environmental educator, a mentorship that goes beyond a neo-managerial paradigm and that offers a ministry of accompaniment to the leaders involved. At the end, the role of Education for Sustainable Development is to support the learner in finding his or her path, the path of passion, the path that leaves you with a reserve of energy to engage in the double challenge. Freire himself had to leave his official role, as he understood the force of hegemony, and he left to remain in the struggle. Here again mentoring can be of an enormous support to leaders and potential leaders in defining their role, in defining their uniqueness and what they can do best for themselves in relation to others.

The hegemonic forces are strong and dominant and a critical friend (a mentor) can be of immense support in the process of finding one's calling and remaining true to it. Furthermore, while motivation is a huge subject in education in the formal sector, more needs to be invested in trainings on motivating adults.

During the various interviews and engagements during this inquiry, the author witnessed his interviewees sharing their doubts—doubts which are themselves pedagogic in that it is not about claiming the knowledge that exists or about managing to find it in a haystack. Rather, as Freire (1970) reminds us, it is about problem posing education. It is about creating the knowledge together in the local context and spaces where the people gather together. Every time we deal with human society we are dealing with change and complexity. That is why the case studies stood out as a mere snapshot of some highlights of a complex ever changing reality. The interviews themselves were creating new knowledge in that the author often set the interviewees thinking in directions they had not considered before. This poses challenges to what type/s of leadership do educators need to support and facilitate to bring to the table complexity as a starting point and real context of emancipatory change? As Darder (2013) posited: "*the vision here is to learn together as a way of life by which we transform the world as community*" (p.14). It is crucial to consider critical leadership as a pedagogy in formal Education for Sustainable Development training courses and within an emerging paradigm (which is more cooperative as against competitive) re-valorise communal forms of leadership and further research and praxis in this area.

10   On Violence

At Bethlehem, the author observed the intentionality of violence with the daily humiliations at check points, sympathising with the Freiren differentiation between justice as intentionality and violence as emanating from communities that struggle (Darder 2013). Calculated daily intentional violence, which degrades and dehumanises the person, needs to be taken into account in any community educational project for empowerment. From the case studies under examination, the violence in Bethlehem was more visible, as expected in an occupation that knows that it can get away with violating 67 UN resolutions with no impunity. Under the violence of the occupation, the subject of what are our sources of hope, often discussed during my initial Environmental Education training, took a completely new meaning.

Yet the violence of poverty, as expressed in Cairo, where the state offers no welfare for vulnerable people is also another form of violence—structural, visible, and hegemonic—and the emancipatory educational efforts of Fair Trade Egypt are as necessary as in Bethlehem. Again Conflict Resolution, in particular the Non-Violent resolution of conflict, does not appear as a core component of most Education for Sustainable Development courses. This needs to be addressed, in particular from an emerging paradigm point of view, which observes violence as creating mass poverty in the south and ever increasing poverty in the North. Social learning also reminds us that we tend to model the behaviours we see around us, which explains the need to make non-violent examples of good practice more known and compassion central to Education for Sustainable Development courses. This is just an extension of the pedagogy of love that Freire was bold enough to passionately believe in and promote.

11   On Revisiting the Research Questions

As adult environmental educators we stand at an important time as every choice we make is done in the context of the challenges, mishaps and chaos of our current reality. The author is aware that work of adult environmental educators and ESD practitioners in the midst of crises, as related to financial issues, to environmental issues (such as climate, energy, transport, food, water), to political dishonesty and to horrific conflicts, has a huge potential impact on our generation and future generations. As the struggles and stories of the leaders and core stakeholders in the case studies analysed indicate, the beauty of an emerging paradigm lies in the reality that no permission needs to be sought in grasping the opportunity to change outmoded mind-sets that no longer serve us and our well-being. Passion and motivation seem to be crucial.

The power of the case studies examined lies in their ability to reframe and critically challenge the taken for granted hegemonic core beliefs of how a municipality, a Church organisation and a trade organisation ought to act. The case studies provide a snapshot of a genuine attempt in moving forward from the competitive technocentric mind-set built on an *I win at the expense of you losing*, which is often the mind-set behind the current challenges and chaos. Winning or success takes the form of keeping a hope alive under a brutal occupation, of privileging the alternative economy that puts people before profit and of rediscovering a sense of community. Winning takes the form of becoming an active participant in fixing the crises that beset us by ripping up the no longer serving hegemonic rules and norms of the dominant paradigm and starting afresh by figuring out what one can best do, from his or her vantage point, to make change towards sustainable development happen.

Today's glocal reality signifies that CSOs and local institutions are constantly faced with a choice to position themselves between a dominant neo-managerial organisational model (mainly based on log frames and project deliverables and largely inspired by the corporate world) and a value-based model (privileging empowerment, capacity building and systems thinking). In positioning themselves CSOs can opt for any form of hybrid that emphasises one end or the other of the spectrum in different measures. With inspiring leadership and a real, as against a token, commitment to a mental mode that embraces citizen mobilisation and new spaces for conversations, both CSOs and local institutions can be a positive force towards sustainable solutions at a local level.

12   Participation

The political space for participation is not a constant, but an ever changing space negotiated through the struggles, doubts and hopes of the relevant stakeholders and conditioned by the socio-political reality of the context in which they operate. The research whose conclusions are presented here focused on three completely different

models of creating such political spaces: through local agenda 21 processes; through networking marginalised producers in the South amongst themselves and with consumers in the North; and through recreating a welcoming community. Whatever the tools used, whether traditional training courses, the setting up of thematic working groups, Open Space Technology or product development, each can be contextualised successfully into a wider framework of expanding the political space for civil society's voice and actions. Clearly, a commitment from the part of the institutions to frame the participation of civil society as a positive factor can be an important process in opening up new spaces for important conversations on sustainable futures.

While resource mobilisation and funding remains a crucial issue for any successful programme, the quality of the links needs to be given more attention, both in research and in the work of adult educators. Whether it is Fair Trade consumers in the North, Palestine solidarity groups, support for product development and entrepreneurial development through a long term presence or the sharing of participatory budgeting experiences, the emerging solidarity is a noteworthy response. It goes beyond the aid paradigm, and in itself is a re-positioning based on joint learning, both in the North and in the South, in face of the changing relationships of globalization and localization.

The vulnerability of local processes was evident through this research. The limited capacity, the difficulties in resource mobilisation, the dependence of the life-cycle of a process on the project time-frame, the dependence of the life-cycle of a process on national (and local) elections, the lack of role models, and the hindering political and social welfare contexts are just some of the vulnerabilities identified. The focus on the immediate results can be a distraction from the wider longer term goals of sustainability. The case studies analysed illustrated positive systemic changes in the *modus operandi* of both institutions and CSOs, yet a longer term longitudinal study is necessary to understand the longer term outcomes of such changes. Furthermore, more study and further research is required to understand the different expressions of success in different contexts and groups. To what extent is it more important to implement all of the goals and targets identified in the local Agenda 21 processes or rather to provide by default inclusive and accountable institutions and new opportunities for citizen expression, empowerment and participation in what effects most in their daily life?

13 Educational Processes

Adult Environmental Educators and Education for Sustainable Development practitioners need to re-define their roles. The eagerness of the author's interviewees to narrate their stories had another message behind the stories told. Their stories were asking for a renewed attention to citizen efforts and conscientisation. One important role of the educator is to support the process of CSOs in articulating their mission and vision and identity beyond the trappings of neo-managerialism

and service delivery. This needs to be sustained by the necessary resources—in proportion to their energy and capacity—to maintain their core mission and relevance to the context in which they operate.

The situations presented had their own doubts, ambiguities, difficulties, at times oppression; and one role of the educator is to accompany CSOs in this uncertainty. An active accompaniment that includes the enhancement of capacities; the building of new, stronger and more effective networks; the mobilisation of those groups normally excluded or hard to include such as youth and migrants; the use of effective tools in communication as per context; the *critical friend* support towards leaders and change makers; and the encouragement to CSOs and institutions of good will in their experimentation in co-creating sustainable communities and futures.

The two local Agenda 21 case studies indicate recognition on the part of the authorities of the role and contribution of civil society. A process with its own tensions, yet a process that can be mediated and further supported by the transformative educator, in particular with regards to processes of critical reflection, analysis, evaluation, systemisation of experiences and social learning, and the capitalisation of experiences. In seeking to open up a space for enabling the increased participation of civil society, authorities also define their own space as catalysts of collaboration, and as taking a leading role in opening up new spaces for diverse perspectives to be debated, confronted, challenged and channelled towards positive solutions for more well-being and a better environment.

14 Conclusion

In documenting the processes, the Educator-Researcher takes on another role—that of bringing to light and sharing the social learning taking place at grassroots and local level. This can be done strategically to scale up social learning, the systemisation and capitalisation of experiences, active solidarity, and participatory and active citizenship. In the face of social, environmental, cultural and economic challenges presented by an ever-changing glocal world, investing in leadership, social learning and in the enhancement of the capacity of both institutions and CSOs, to *be* and *become* innovative co-creators of a new emerging paradigm, is a challenge for educators to embrace with passion and urgency!

References

Darder A (2013) Leadership for social justice and community empowerment: a Frierian approach. In: Conference presentation, University of Malta, October 2013

Derrida J (2005) The politics of friendship. Verso, London

Freire P (1970) Pedagogy of the oppressed. Herder and Herder, New York

Freire P (1998) Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy and civic courage. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, Lanham

Jickling B, Wals A (2012) Debating education for sustainable development 20 years after Rio: a conservation between Bob Jickling and Arjen Wals. J Educ Sustain Dev 6(2):49–57

Kjorven O (2003) The millennium development goals: a challenge to global education to 2015. In: O'Loughline E, Wegimont L (eds) Global education in Europe to 2015: strategy, policies and perspectives: outcomes and papers of the Europe-wide Global Education Congress Maastricht, The Netherlands. North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, Lisbon, 15–17 Nov 2002, pp 29–33

McTaggart L (2011) The bond: connecting through the space between us. Hay House, London

O'Loughline E, Wegimont L (2003) Global education in Europe to 2015, strategy, policies and perspectives: Outcomes and papers of the Europe-wide global education congress Maastricht, The Netherlands. North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, Lisbon, 15–17 Nov 2002

Pedrazzini E, obo North South Centre Secretariat (2012) The impact of global/development education. In: North-South Centre, 2nd European Congress on Global Education: education, interdependence and solidarity in a changing world. North-South Centre, Lisbon, pp 56–62

Secrett C (2011) An open letter to the green movement. The Guardian. http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jun/21/charles-secrett-open-letter-activists

Thomashow M (1995) Ecological identity: becoming a reflective environmentalist. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge

UNESCO (1977) Tbilisi declaration (1977). http://www.gdrc.org/uem/ee/tbilisi.html

World Social Forum (2001) Charter of principles. http://www2.portoalegre.rs.gov.br/fsm2013_ing/default.php?p_secao=5. Accessed Nov 10, 2013

Author Biography

Vince Caruana was born on the 10 April 1967. In 1991 he obtained an honours degree in Education from the University of Malta, specialising in Physics and Mathematics. Three years later he obtained a Diploma in Political Studies from the same University. Subsequently between 1995 and 1998 he studied Environmental and Development Education, obtaining an M.Sc. through London South Bank University. Vince is currently a full-time lecturer at the Centre for Environmental Education and Research (University of Malta), where he has just obtained his Ph.D., focusing on education for sustainability, in particular among adults, youth and the community. Vince has been for the past 25 years very active in the Development NGO scene, both locally and at a European level.