WaRDS association submission – May 2007

Education and community engagement in the context of the Committee's inquiry into a sustainability charter.

The term "sustainability" has recently been overused, and misused.
We feel it is important to state how we understand it as a community group.
For us, a sustainable community is one that is able to satisfy its needs and aspirations without diminishing the opportunities of other communities and future generations.
A sustainable human community must be designed in such a manner that its people and its ways of life, technologies, and social institutions respect, support, and cooperate with nature's inherent ability to sustain life.

Can we educate our own community to become sustainable? Can we flourish – like natural systems – with abundance of energy and without waste? Can we engage other communities and guide them on pathways to sustainability?

Education for sustainability must challenge individuals, institutions, government and society.
Our problem today is the scale and complexity of such task and the turn-around time for change demanded by scientists, engineers and economists to counter the threat of global warming and its dire consequences for the planet and the next generations.
The resistance to change is mainly caused by increased centralization in many areas of government, globalization and the pressure of 'the market' on many areas of social life.
It is not surprising to find that the dominant conception of social progress is strongly associated with economic progress and technological change. The predominant model of decision making in Australia gives primacy to the economy and assumes that social and environmental problems can be solved if the economy is sound. It also confuses sustainability and progress.
This conceptual view of "sustainability" is prevailing because of GDP is the official indicator of progress and 'good' government.

These factors undermine the community engagement initiatives, the quality and value of local social systems and obstruct human relationships and our sense of connectedness with our natural and cultural landscape so familiar to the Aboriginal way of life.
The model needed for sustainability must recognize that the economy is sub-set to society, and that society is constrained by the natural world.

It is predictable that expansionary financial goals and associated perceived increased "standards of living" will not be sustainable. A pro-active approach to managing these goals in accordance with a redefined social model would seem to be preferable to the current reactive approach.
Education for sustainability requires the integration of ecological literacy into social and economic planning. The community is where this integration begins.

Respected and well known American educator Robert Putnam's central message is that interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric. Putnam stressed the importance of the educational environment including child development programs, availability of public spaces and forums, economic prosperity and public health. Another famous educator, the Brazilian Paulo Freire insists on situating educational activity in the lived experience of participants, and his directive has opened up a series of possibilities for informal educators. The acceptance of the inherent value of all individuals and their right to be part of the community is fundamental to creating value and a pathway to world peace.

The case for sustainable community as an aim of education (or at least the development of social networks with concern for reciprocity, trust and tolerance) is strong.
We may like John Dewey argue that the aim of education is to prepare individuals so that they can actively engage in their community and contribute to society.
Our sense of well-being is in the linkages of the social system. As social beings, the capacities we have to live and work in groups is intrinsic to our quality of life.

Education for sustainable living fosters both an intellectual understanding of ecology and emotional bonds with nature and fellow humans; these make it more likely that our children will grow into responsible citizens who truly care about sustaining life, and develop a

passion for applying their ecological understanding to the fundamental redesign of our technologies and social institutions. Through education we can bridge the current gap between human design and the ecologically sustainable systems of nature.

Community engagement in the context of sustainability is in fact informal education and can be paralleled with well documented community engagement processes in the context of Natural Resources Management.
As Tim Smith (CSIRO) states in his study "*Current engagement practice for NRM in the SEQ western catchments*" *The effectiveness of traditional approaches to engagement [...] may continue to diminish over time. A novel approach to maximising engagement effectiveness has been proposed [...] which has a focus on* **matching potential participant motivations and preferences for engagement with engagement practitioner capacities.**
The development of a typology of engagement has the added benefit of highlighting non-NRM engagement activities that could add value to NRM engagement processes. When designing an engagement strategy, the authors also highlight a number of opportunities, constraints and governance considerations, which are often context-specific, and may bound the success or failure of actual engagement practice."

Five aspects of Paulo Freire's work have a particular significance for our purposes here. First, his emphasis on dialogue has struck a very strong chord with those concerned with popular and informal education. Second, Paulo Freire was concerned with praxis - action that is informed (and linked to certain values). Third was his concern with developing consciousness, but consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality. Fourth, his insistence on situating educational activity in the lived experience; and finally the divide between teachers and learners must be transcended.

In concluding I would like to challenge our scientific and economic experts and our politicians who still advocate the use of technological solutions to counter the threat of global warming; to turn to real solutions based on education and community engagement.
If we, in the developed countries, continue consuming at excessive levels then we can expect that developing nations will demand the same unsustainable standards of living.

Appendix

John Dewey's famous declaration concerning education. First published in The School Journal, Volume LIV, Number 3 (January 16, 1897), pages 77-80.

I believe that all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race. This process begins unconsciously almost at birth, and is continually shaping the individual's powers, saturating his consciousness, forming his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions. Through this unconscious education the individual gradually comes to share in the intellectual and moral resources which humanity has succeeded in getting together. He becomes an inheritor of the funded capital of civilization. The most formal and technical education in the world cannot safely depart from this general process. It can only organize it or differentiate it in some particular direction.

I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling, and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Through the responses which others make to his own activities he comes to know what these mean in social terms. The value which they have is reflected back into them. For instance, through the response which is made to the child's instinctive babblings the child comes to know what those babblings mean; they are transformed into articulate language and thus the child is introduced into the consolidated wealth of ideas and emotions which are now summed up in language.

I believe that this educational process has two sides-one psychological and one sociological; and that neither can be subordinated to the other or neglected without evil results following. Of these two sides, the psychological is the basis. The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education. Save as the efforts of the educator connect with some activity which the child is carrying on of his own initiative independent of the educator, education becomes reduced to a pressure from without. It may, indeed, give certain external results, but cannot truly be called educative. Without insight into the psychological structure and activities of the individual, the educative process will, therefore, be haphazard and arbitrary. If it chances to coincide with the child's activity it will get a leverage; if it does not, it will result in friction, or disintegration, or arrest of the child nature.

I believe that knowledge of social conditions, of the present state of civilization, is necessary in order properly to interpret the child's powers. The child has his own instincts and tendencies, but we do not know what these mean until we can translate them into their social equivalents. We must be able to carry them back into a social past and see them as the inheritance of previous race activities. We must also be able to project them into the future to see what their outcome and end will be. In the illustration just used, it is the ability to see in the child's babblings the promise and potency of a future social intercourse and conversation which enables one to deal in the proper way with that instinct.

I believe that the psychological and social sides are organically related and that education cannot be regarded as a compromise between the two, or a superimposition of one upon the other. We are told that the psychological definition of education is barren and formal--that it gives us only the idea of a development of all the mental powers without giving us any idea of the use to which these powers are put. On the other hand, it is urged that the social definition of education, as getting adjusted to civilization, makes of it a forced and external process, and

results in subordinating the freedom of the individual to a preconceived social and political status.

I believe that each of these objections is true when urged against one side isolated from the other. In order to know what a power really is we must know what its end, use, or function is; and this we cannot know save as we conceive of the individual as active in social relationships. But, on the other hand, the only possible adjustment which we can give to the child under existing conditions, is that which arises through putting him in complete possession of all his powers. With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions, it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions. To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently. It is impossible to reach this sort of adjustment save as constant regard is had to the individual's own powers, tastes, and interests-say, that is, as education is continually converted into psychological terms.

In sum, I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass. Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits. It must be controlled at every point by reference to these same considerations. These powers, interests, and habits must be continually interpreted--we must know what they mean. They must be translated into terms of their social equivalents--into terms of what they are capable of in the way of social service.