

### Reviewer Biography

**Chris Harle** is the Sustainability Engagement Coordinator for Lake Macquarie City Council, focusing on engaging individuals and communities in all aspects of sustainability, including in increasing disaster preparedness and resilience. She has a social work background, previously working in a diverse range of social work roles in community organisations and a local health district setting. After obtaining a Master of Public Health (Health Promotion) she became a Health Service Manager, managing a community health service in a local health district for 4 years prior to joining local government. Chris is a member of the Australian Association of Social Workers.

## Social Learning Towards a Sustainable World: Principles, Perspectives and Praxis

Arjen E. J. Wals (Editor) Wageningen Academic Publishers, The Netherlands, 2007  
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Reviewed by Annette Gough, School of Education, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

*Social Learning Towards a Sustainable World: Principles, Perspectives and Praxis* was an ambitious project. Arjen Wals, now UNESCO Chair of Social Learning and Sustainable Development at Wageningen University, brought together numerous well-known writers in environmental education in the late 20th and early 21st century (Stephen Sterling, Daniella Tilbury, David Selby, and Paul Hart) with some lesser known Europeans and North Americans, some (then) emerging scholars, and a few Australians (Richard Bawden, Valerie Brown, Robert Dyball and Meg Keen), then topped and tailed the volume with a foreword by Fritjof Capra and afterword by Michael W. Apple. Across the 27 well-written chapters, the authors confront some big issues in environmental sustainability education across principles, perspectives, and praxis, in three parts. These three parts are introduced by Wals and Tore van der Leij and epilogued by Wals. The focus of the book is an exploration of social learning from the perspective of a range of fields that are challenged by sustainability, including: organisational learning, environmental management and corporate social responsibility; multi-stakeholder governance; education, learning and educational psychology; multiple land-use and integrated rural development; and consumerism and critical consumer education. With these multiple foci there is almost something for anyone in this edited collection.

Importantly for scholarship of this nature, Lowan-Trudeau positions himself for his readers, sharing his background as a Métis-Canadian of mixed Algonquian and European ancestry. Although raised in a city, he acknowledges living a childhood characterised by a 'constant métissage of urban and rural environments' (p. 7) and outlines that his professional background includes vast experience as an outdoor and environmental educator. With this positioning comes the adoption of a reflexive posture throughout his research journeys. Also important, particularly for an international

readership, the author situates his discussion by offering an overview of the Canadian context, sharing facets of the country's cultural background and roots, history of colonisation and its effects on indigenous peoples, and aspects of what he terms the 'Canadian ecological identity'. Given a historical context in which Western perspectives have often conflicted with Indigenous cultural understandings, Lowan-Trudeau's work is an important addition to the voices calling for critical consideration of the value of indigenous knowledge.

Like sustainable development, social learning is a term that is used in a variety of ways. This book presents it as 'not just a naturally-occurring phenomenon but also a way of organizing learning and communities of learners' while recognising that there is no consensus about the meaning of social learning, but noting that 'in this book it tends to refer to learning that takes place when divergent interests, norms, values and constructions of reality meet in an environment that is conducive to learning' (Wals & van der Leij, p. 18). The Introduction concludes that there is a need for discussion of the terms *social learning* and *sustainability* and their relationship, and invites 'readers to critically consider social learning as a transitional and transformative process that can help create the kinds of systemic changes needed to meet the challenges of sustainability' (Wals & van der Leij, p. 32). Wals has encouraged these discussions and considerations in subsequent publications (Lotz-Sisitka, 2012; Wals, van der Hoeven, & Blanken, 2009) and both of these are worth reading if you are interested in social learning and how its conceptualisation is evolving. As Wals et al. (2009, p. 28) conclude:

*The success of social learning depends a great deal on the collective goals and / or visions shared by those engaged in the process. Whether such collective goals and / or visions can actually be achieved, at least in part, on the amount of space for possible conflicts, oppositions and contradictions. In social learning the conflicts and their underlying sources, need to be explicated rather than concealed. By explicating and deconstructing the oftentimes diverging norms, values, interests and constructions of reality people bring to a sustainability challenge, it not only becomes possible to analyze and understand their roots and their persistence, but also to begin a collaborative change process in which the kind of shared meanings and joint actions emerge that will ultimately help create a more sustainable world.*

Although each chapter in the volume is well written, many are not an easy read, even for those well immersed in the field. There are some challenging ideas and perspectives, and much food for thought. To help the reader, the Introduction provides an overview of each of the chapters with the sensible suggestion that you use this to plan a meaningful pathway through the book. I agree. I do not think this is a book to read from cover to cover but rather to sample for the stories and perspectives — some of which will resonate and some will not, depending on your own particular context.

Part 1 comprises nine chapters focused on 'Principles' of social learning. In the first chapter, Harold Glasser provides some provocative challenges to social education researchers. Stephen Sterling then discusses the nature of an ecological worldview and argues for a more ecological or relational cultural worldview, particularly in the West. Chapter 5 explores the links between social learning and sustainability, and Chapter 3 proposes some principles for social learning in the context of sustainable development, while Chapter 4 links social learning with four different dimensions of participatory processes. Chapter 6 explores 'a learning society' and argues for 'societal learning' rather than social learning as a better expression of the capacity of societies to be more

learning oriented. Chapter 7 applies resilience theory to urban-socio-ecological systems, and David Selby in Chapter 8 argues that social learning for sustainability calls for different — quantum — learning. In the final chapter of this part the authors develop five essential strands of social learning that they believe can be woven through iterative cycles of learning, across various scales of application and between various partners in learning processes.

The 12 chapters in Part 2 are concerned with ‘Perspectives’ on social learning in the context of sustainability, using particular examples to illustrate their arguments. These include analysing the initial experiences of the first group of Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) for education for sustainable development (ESD); analysing a typical, common property-based Andean land-use; participatory planning in protected areas in Flanders; developing corporate social responsibility in a Dutch initiative and in mainstream business settings; and using The Natural Step learning strategy. Two of the chapters in this part specifically focus on formal education. Paul Hart argues for action research as a form of social learning with a particular focus on the school-based Environment and Schools Initiative (ENSI) project. He suggests that action research when viewed as social learning has the potential to help teachers to acknowledge their multiple subjectivities and blur boundaries between binaries to create new educational experiences. Marcia McKenzie discusses different conceptions of agency and related modes of socio-ecological activism and argues for the power of reflexivity for engaging students in activism. The last two chapters focus on consumerism and consumer education and how these can be reframed from a social learning perspective and education for sustainability.

Part 3 provides seven case studies of ‘Praxis’ that demonstrate how the principles of social learning and perspectives on sustainability are applied in a range of community and school-based projects across Japan, the United States, six European countries, South Africa, Uganda, Ecuador, and a global network. What is good about these chapters, apart from the stories themselves, is that the authors draw out the implications of their experiences for social learning, participation, knowledge creation, and practices in other contexts.

In conclusion, if you are interested in social learning and how its conceptualisation is evolving, as a companion to the Wals (2007) volume I recommend that you look at both subsequent publications. Wals et al. (2009) is a succinct 32-page document that explains why sustainable development needs social learning, the features of social learning, and the six phases of social learning. The Lotz-Sisitka (2012) edited monograph provides four different (selective) reviews of the social learning literature. The first paper reviews the different ways that social learning is conceptualised in natural resource management, which concludes that there is confusion in the literature that stems from the same term being used to refer to quite different processes with different outcomes as their goal. The second paper focuses on methodologies used by social learning researchers in undertaking social learning research. The authors highlight the contextual nature of social learning research and the strong reliance on the use of case studies and ex-post reflexive studies, and conclude ‘that there is a need to consider the internal coherence of social learning research assumptions and ontological, epistemological and axiological positions and associated methodologies in social learning research’ (p. 12). The third paper draws attention to the need for social learning researchers to give more attention to translating and understanding their languages of participatory development and learning as practice in practice. The fourth paper focuses on understanding the social in social learning and the learning in social learning in order to better understand social learning. The authors emphasise the need to avoid ‘ontological collapse’ — when a social process is represented as an object in scientific literature — in social

learning research. Social learning is a process that is common across formal, non-formal and informal education and as such warrants attention as we seek to achieve the United Nations (2016) sustainable development goals and follow the UNESCO (2014) Roadmap for Implementing ESD.

Note: As well as the print edition, this book is available online at <http://edepot.wur.nl/141070>.

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