

Sustainable Learning Communities: The Case of the Incredible Shrinking Professor

Elisabeth Hamin

Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning

University of Massachusetts- Amherst

emhamin@larp.umass.edu

ABSTRACT

For two years in Massachusetts and three years in Iowa, I have taught a combined graduate/undergraduate course in sustainable communities. The focus of the course is on steps that can be taken in the built environment to increase the economy, ecology, and equity of our local communities. Originally, the course was a fairly standard lecture course with a research paper component. Over the years, the course has changed substantially so that the pedagogy much more directly mirrors the issues of sustainability in the community. My argument is that implementing sustainability will require different learners and knowers than we tend to train in traditional college courses. Because of this, teaching in this area requires a different approach if the goal is to graduate students with an activist outlook on implementing sustainable measures, in all their social and technical complexity.

Effecting sustainability in our communities, whether urban, suburban or rural, will get easier with better technologies—cost-effective solar and hydrogen power, dependable ‘living machine’ treatments for sewage, etc. But developing the will, the political power and centrality, to implement these, is not a technical issue. It is an issue of creating empowered communities of learners and doers who view their value sets as reasonable interpretations of the world. Training students of sustainability in technically-driven, individually contained, teacher-oriented pedagogic approaches by necessity will fail to fully address the requirements of the transition to a sustainable world.

The challenge becomes to implement this insight so that course pedagogy is consistent with instructor and topic values. I have conceptualized this as teaching the course with a goal that by the end, the professor is irrelevant to the learning outcomes of the course. Several approaches are important in this. While in the first part of the semester I talk a good bit, by the second half the students are running the class, presenting both readings summaries and their own research to their fellow students. While this is not unusual for doctoral or even advanced graduate seminars, for many undergraduate students, this may be the first time they are directly asked to take charge for their own, and their fellow, students learning. I have in some years organized peer-reading teams, so that each student’s research paper is read and commented on by peers. This peer-reviewing tends to have mixed success, and is a good indicator of the level of learning community which has been established—and that of course varies by the individual people who happen to take the course in any particular year. The final topic that has proven to be important is engaging the students in a service-learning component that directly relates to their life, and that is largely determined by them. For this, I define that our topic of inquiry will be greening the campus. From there on, it is up to them to decide what steps will be accomplished in any particular year.

The final version of this paper will include references to the sustainability literature, other efforts to green the campus, and the learning-centered pedagogy literature, and will include limited outcomes assessment of the direct response to this pedagogic approach to the course.