ESDebate

Internet Discussion on Education for Sustainable Development
By **Arjen E.J. Wals and Frits Hesselink**

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1. BACKGROUND

Initiative

At the Pan European Expert Meeting on Sustainable Development and Environmental Education (Soesterberg, Netherlands, 27 – 29 January 1999), Douwe Jan Joustra, Program Manager of the Dutch Extra Impulse for Environmental Education, floated the idea to organize a follow-up with the use of ICT. The idea caught on and the Dutch Interdepartmental Steering

Group for Environmental Education recognized the need for further discussion of the issue, especially as it was planning a next phase of its Program focused on 'learning for sustainability'. Furthermore a need was felt to explore new ways of knowledge management and to introduce ICT further to the Dutch practice of environmental education. Debates on environmental education had taken place on internet before, but they were merely a collection of articles and not an exchange of opinions to stimulate debate and new ideas. Innovation in managing the process was another challenge.

Objectives

The Inter Departmental Steering Group asked the NCDO (Dutch Committee for Sustainable Development) to organize a tender. By the end of April 1999 HECT Consultancy was asked to manage the project, form a team of moderators and fulfil the following objectives:

- **Bridge the gap between the Dutch policy with regard to ESD and the international practice of ESD**
- **Provide Dutch experts with an impulse for deepening their thinking about ESD by confronting them with opinions from international experts**
- **Contribute to the ongoing international debate on ESD managed by UNESCO and CSD**

Challenges

The moderators recognised that organizing a professional discussion among experts on the internet meant that they had to meet several challenges. Major challenges they felt they had to take on, were:

- **How to find and motivate participants: what costs and benefits are in it for them?**
- **How to work from an unknown web site?**
- **How to keep the exchange lively, readable and avoid long articles**
- **How to keep the interest of participants and the public over a longer period?**
- **How to make the exchange of ideas, opinions and experience into the learning exercise?**

2. APPROACH

The moderators

Education for Sustainable Development is an 'ill defined' concept. One can approach it from various perspectives. The education perspective brings in the individual learning, the pedagogy, the emancipation. The perspective of sustainable development brings in aspects of policy and management of processes in organizations and communities. These two different paradigms are often difficult to reconcile. For that reason HECT Consultancy chose for a project team of people with different backgrounds. An academic researcher in environmental education, a consultant for education and communication policies and programs, a marketing expert and a webmaster with experience in educational projects.

Structure

As a preparation to the ESDebate several Internet On-line discussions were studied. The moderators felt that the level of participation in those debates varied strongly. In some cases a few participants produced extensive contributions, while many participants hardly contributed. Much reading was required to participate. Also, often a low response was found to the questions or the essays which were to be critiqued. So the moderators choose for a semi-closed group of selected participants and a specific round format to get a high response rate.

Participants

To guarantee quality of input the moderators choose for a process of invitation of participants in the exchange. It would be open to everyone, but the main discussion would be among a smaller group. The project time schedule did not allow for lengthy processes in identifying the participants. The moderators started with approaching a small group of experts who had attended the Soesterberg Conference and some key people from their own international networks in environmental education and sustainable development. They asked them for more names and then approached experts which were suggested.

Personal Approach

Participants were approached by email and preferably by a moderator who knew the expert personally. During the whole period of the internet discussion, communication between the moderators and participants was done through email (always with the ESDebate address present to click on) and had if possible a personal touch. Participants

Creating a new Brand?

One of the characteristics of Internet is the abundance of information. Adding a new initiative is like creating a new brand. The moderators thought it a success factor for ESDebate if the discussion was presented in a distinct way from other initiatives on environmental education and sustainable development on the web. The discussion should have its own name: ESDebate. ESD is recognized easily among the experts. Debate should appeal to the notion of real interaction. It should be interaction between high quality experts. You should either be one of those experts or know one or more of them. The name was promoted in a PR campaign through magazines, web sites and networks in the field of environmental education and sustainable development.

Registration makes site and idea visible

Mid June a list of invited participants was published on the web according to nationalities. This triggered more suggestions for participation. Participants were asked on the website to fill in the registration form and already give some statements on the issue. These answers were immediately accessible for visitors and other participants. So between July and September one could see of each registered participant a photo, an abbreviated CV, favourite books and web sites, vision statements on sustainable development and education. The registration was the first possibility for the moderators to receive feedback and suggestions from participants. It also gave moderators an overview in which regions or sectors to invest to stimulate participation.

Links with well known websites

One of the first things the moderators did was to ask organizations with a well known web site to be a partner organization in this project and make a link from their home page to that of ESDebate and vice versa. It not only added credibility to ESDebate, but it proved to be vital for hits by non participants. During the debate 50% of the visits to ESDebate came through the web sites of IUCN and UNESCO. Publicity of the debate through existing networks was another investment.

Success factors for a web site

To ask people's time over a period of four months to really engage in an international exchange on the internet is asking quite a lot. Characteristics of internet are its transient nature, surfing and zapping, staying very short on a page, until one sees something very interesting. To contribute to five rounds and to read each others contributions takes much

more. The moderators designed the site as interesting and readable as possible, with opportunities to visit other sites, a top ten of sites and books, visuals, a clear navigation structure and teasers for revisiting the site.

Creating commitment: a publication

But this is not enough to create commitment for participation in the discussion. While approaching the first participants the moderators noticed the dilemma of many academics that providing contributions without credits made it more were contrary to the academic culture. The moderators then got IUCN's Commission on Education and Communication interested in making a publication of ESDebate and give credits to participants for their contributions.

Creating ownership and joint learning

The moderators had announced in the earliest version of the web page that ESDebate would be conducted in 5 rounds. A first round to explore the concept of Education for Sustainability, a second round to discuss examples of good practice and a third round to investigate the implications. The subjects of the last two rounds were kept open to be filled in later at the suggestions of participants. Each round participants were asked for feedback and the moderators tried their best to incorporate the many suggestions they received into the process. When after a few rounds a returning issue in the debate appeared to be the conflicting paradigms of education and of sustainable development policies, the fourth round was entirely devoted entirely two this subject. In the last round participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the debate and their own and collective learning.

Planning and themes of the debate

Round	Issue	Input deadline	Publication of results
I	Concepts of education for sustainable development	10 September 1999	24 September 1999
II	Examples of good practice	8 October 1999	15 October 1999
III	Implications of good practice: how can progress be achieved?	29 October 1999	5 November 1999
IV	Theme dependent on the course of the discussion	19 November 1999	26 November 1999
V	Theme dependent on the course of the discussion	17 December 1999	24 December 1999

Table 1: Structure of the debate

Articles versus interaction

There is an abundant literature on Environmental Education and Sustainable Development. Conferences and workshops have triggered numerous articles. No wonder that one's first reflex in participating in an internet expert discussion is to communicating by sending in his or her existing articles. The moderators have tried to find a structure to avoid this. They opened each round with statements, on which participants were asked to react. The statements were followed by a few open questions. This approach was meant to focus the attention to specific questions and provoke an immediate personal answer.

How to avoid drop outs?

The moderators had designed a system of regular communication with participants during the months September – December, the time for the discussion proper. Providing them right from the start with a time table for a reach round. Asking them to reserve time in their agenda in specific weeks. Sending reminders in time. And making sure that at the indicated time the results of each round were indeed visible on the web site of ESDebate. Sometimes personal emails were used to urge participants to respond. The time schedule was also designed so tight, that participants almost had no time to forget ESDebate and their commitments.

How to service non participants?

Visitors of the site who were not participants, could read all the information of the rounds, summaries of the answers, the individual answers themselves, the opening statements and personal data of participants, etc. If they wished to make comments, ask questions or react to the discussion the moderators had made a guest book. They also had the opportunity to mail directly to individual participants.

3.   RESULTS 1: content of the debate

ESD = EE?

There appears to be consensus that ESD as a force, phenomenon or tool within contemporary education, both formal and non-formal, has to be reckoned with and has added value. Less agreement can be found with regards to the relationship between ESD and EE. Many view ESD as the next generation of EE which includes issues of ethics, equity and new ways of thinking and learning. Others say the ESD should be a part of good EE and there is no need to do away with EE as an umbrella. Again others suggest that EE is a part of ESD. They argue that ESD is more comprehensive than EE by including issues of development, North-South relationships, cultural diversity, social and environmental equity. Figure 1 shows the four relationships between EE and ESD as can be found among the participants. Despite the differences in opinion about the relationship between EE and ESD most participants appear to regard ESD as the next evolutionary stage or new generation of EE.
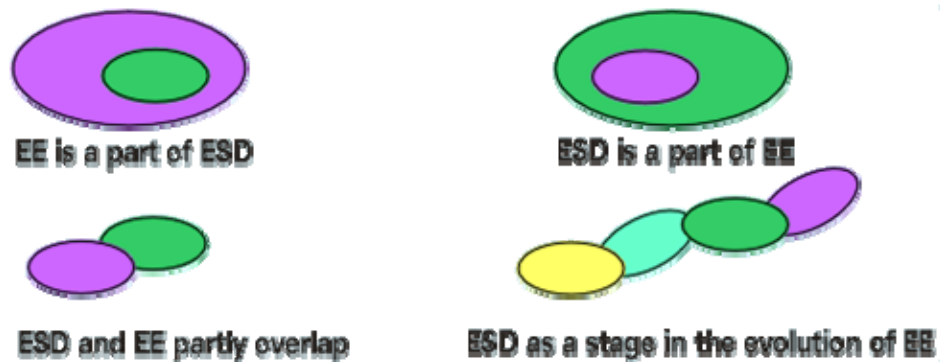
Figure 1: The relationship between ESD and EE

ESD for or about?

Many participants are quite comfortable with ESD as a tool to develop norms and values and change practices and lifestyles. Emphasis is placed on developing so-called higher thinking skills and personal, social and environmental competencies. Several participants suggest that indeed some values are more sustainable than others, and there is nothing wrong about teaching these values and to teach for sustainable development. Some participants, however, are quite uncomfortable with ESD as a tool to change behaviour. They argue that ESD should enable people to determine their own pathways towards sustainable living. The emphasis should, in their eyes, be on developing the competencies people need for achieving this and working towards a more democratic and equitable world. They oppose the idea of pre- and expert determined universal norms and values of sustainability. Since nobody knows what the ethically and morally right sustainable values of behaviours are for oneself and certainly not for others, they feel it is more appropriate to speak of education about sustainable development. It should be noted that some of them also object to the whole notion of sustainable development and much rather speak of education about sustainability. Figure 2 illustrates how the main focal points of EE seems to be shifting.

Figure 2: The emergence of a new kind of environmental education?

Distinctive features of ESD

Those participants who seem to view ESD as a successor of EE argue it is more future-oriented (careful examination of probable and possible futures), critical of the predominant market and consumption driven society, more sensitive to the different realities that challenge people around the world (sensitive to context), more systemic in dealing with complexity, more community and solidarity oriented (as opposed to individualistic and self-promoting), less concerned with product (behavioural outcomes), more concerned with process (creating the right conditions for social learning), more open to new ways of thinking and doing, and

preoccupied with linking social, economic and environmental equity at the local, regional and global level.

Some cautionary remarks were made by some participants as well. Some warn of ESD becoming a tool of policy-makers and market players. Or suggest that Sustainable Development is nothing more (or less) than a neo-colonial concept riding the waves of globalisation…

There was consensus among the participants that ESD should not just focus on school audiences, but also and perhaps foremost on situations where informal and non-formal education takes place i.e. the workplace, recreation areas, people's homes, etc., as well as in policy and decision making processes. Some even prefer to speak of *learning* rather than of *education*, since education, in their eyes, has strong connotations with in-school and formal learning whereas, the 'broader' concept of learning refers to learning taking place at all levels in all situations both formal, informal and non-formal .

ESD as a force for change

The majority of the participants are of the opinion that ESD can provide an important contribution to sustainable development or, as some prefer, to sustainability. Most participants have a rather utopian vision of the future and describe in various way a better world. A few of them find creating imaginary or possible sustainable futures an essential element of ESD for it inspires creative thinking and gives a sense of hope. Some participants stress that it is preferable to describe possible directions that can change over time rather than to prescribe fixed targets to be achieved at all cost.

Some participants pointed out that the major driver of a sustainable future is a change in socio-economic structures which, in their eyes, breed inequity and over-consumption. Without such structural change, they seem to suggest, the well-organized and globally institutionalized drive to consume will be far greater than the newly emerging drive to sustain. Education is considered by most of the participants to be one of the driving forces to bring about such structural change and a more sustainable world. However, there are also some participants who seem to believe that we are a crisis-driven species. In other words: it will take a major crisis or an avalanche of smaller crises to really force humanity to pull together and rally behind more sustainable socio-economic structures and the norms and values embedded in concepts of sustainability.

There is an overwhelming richness of ideas and visions among the participants, which invite further thought and reflection. We invite you to take a closer look at them by visiting the website.

4.   RESULTS 2: Process of the debate

Participants

From about 70 invited participants, 58 participants registrated, coming from 25 different countries. Most of them participated in three or more rounds. Between 22 and 40 participants took part per round. The majority of participants have an academic and or environmental education background. Somehow ESDebate has not been able to attract participation from experts involved in sustainable development and learning in the corporate and public sector. This coloured the dominating paradigm in the discussion: more focus on pedagogy and individual emancipation than on learning organization and managing processes towards sustainability.

Outreach

In the period June until September the site attracted more than one thousand hits. Since September 1999 the site has received over 4900 'hits' from 104 countries (as of mid February 2000). Although there do are no data available to answer the question how intensive the site has been visited, from looking a the hit-frequency of similar educational sites one can conclude that this is a remarkable result. The figure below gives some indications of the geographical spread of the hits.

Pageviews by country since 09/99 (02/16/00)		
Europe	1911	38.87%
North America	724	14.72%
Asia	181	3.68%
South America	145	2.95%
Australia	109	2.22%
Central America	104	2.12%
Africa	43	0.87%
Unknown	1700	34.58%

Structure of ESDebate

The structure of the debate (five rounds, invited participants, public guest book, round summaries, firm time schedule and personal probing) was valued by most of the participants. Particularly the inviting design of the web-site, the speed with which it was possible to answer the round surveys, and the quality of the round summaries and the speed with which they were put on the web, appears to be appreciated. Those who had little time but wanted to be part of the debate could suffice by answering the closed 'trigger' questions and ignore some or all of the open questions, those who had more time or whose work it is to reflect on some of the issues raised, could spend more time on the open questions and elaborate on their answers.

Guest book

The public guest book was useful to the moderators to pick up signals from the wider audience about the direction the debate was going. Also people who felt excluded could express so. If someone strongly felt that the debate was too closed and could make a case for being included him or herself, the moderators would open the debate to accommodate this. The number of guest book entries (43 through mid-February) is quite low compared to the number of hits during the same time period (4900). More information is needed about what the people visiting the site actually did.

Visitors and outreach

Three categories of visitors can be distinguished: 1) *hit & miss surfers* who stumble upon a site and leave right away, 2) *relay surfers* who discover the site, have a quick look at it and pass it on to friends who belong to category 3) *deep surfers* who visit several layers of the site, return to the site more than once and may even download information. Although a NedStat counter was used to keep track of the origin of people visiting the site and the frequency of the visitations, we lack information about number of people belonging to each category. Anecdotal evidence, mostly gathered during environmental education conferences attended by the moderators, suggests that the debate has reached many professionals in the field. Of course, the fact that the debate was in the English language may have excluded many potential visitors and may have discouraged people to write in the guest book.

Discussion

In addition to the positive comments about the debate and its format there are some reservations and objections to the format as well. These reservations can be summarized by the following two questions:

- **Was it a debate?**
- **Were the right questions being asked?**

Debate?

Some participants did not really consider this to be a debate. It is stated that the level of interaction between participants is too low for it to be called a debate. Most interaction takes place in between the moderators and individual participants. Some interaction does take place between individual participants as a result of ESDebate, but this interaction remains unnoticed for the larger group. In essence, the moderators are surveying the ideas of a selected group of EE-experts from around the world and summarize these every round.

Interaction

Indeed, technically speaking it is not a real debate. The discussion triggered a lot of opinions, anecdotes, and new ideas. These were accessible for everyone and summarized by the moderators. Some bilateral interaction went on between participants – through their email linkages - but this was not visible for others. The language used is almost spoken language and far away from that of a scientific article. Participants spoke right from their heart, and some times showed enormous spontaneity. The contents of the various inputs shows an enormous richness in thinking and ideas, which ask for further exploration.

Right questions?

The language of the questions, as some participants commented, was the language of instrumental thinkers (i.e. using words like target groups, delivery, tools, marketing, etc.) and the world of positivism. Critics of such thinking argue that the same thinking lies at the root of many social and environmental problems in the world today. Addressing these problems requires new ways of thinking and alternative worldviews. The questions should reflect this, they argued.

Statements: closed questions

Furthermore, some participants criticized the closed questions: the statements, they argued, are often ambiguous and are stripped from context, so it is hard to know what respondents meant with their answers. Evidentially, interpreting the cumulated data becomes rather tricky in this situation. Some participants suggested that statements only have merit when the opportunity is given to clarify the answers (bringing in context and nuance). In later rounds this possibility was added.

Statements: effective triggers

The statements were intended as appetizers and a 'quick and dirty' way to get the keyboards to heat up. From the lengthy responses to the open questions this seems to have worked. We agree that 'quick and dirty' is not the best way to get at the subtleties and nuances which are necessary in an increasingly polarized world. Particularly academics tend to have an allergic reaction to 'quick and dirty' survey methods, especially when the questions are ambiguous and open to many interpretations. A balance needs to be struck between getting quick and arousing responses and providing space for nuances, subtleties of meaning and sensitivity to alternative viewpoints.

What has been missing?

The input of the corporate sector is definitely one of the major missing elements in ESDebate. The corporate sector is picking up considerations of sustainable development in its practices with considerable speed. Corporations increasingly also recognise that this a learning exercise. Knowledge management and learning organizations are key concepts in this development. The same is true for various areas in the public sector. Input from experiences from the private and public sector has been mostly missing in the educational debates sofar. ESDebate has been no exception in that respect. A next time the moderators would put much more effort in the beginning to guarantee participation from these sectors.

Final thoughts of participants

Round 5 of the ESDebate provided an overview of the various ways in which participants evaluated the exercise. That not all participants leave the debate with the same feelings is clearly illustrated by the following quotes:

"The debate has so far seemed to me rather like a lot of little paper boats launched onto a pond, bobbing around independently but getting nowhere much. Surely they need to become a fleet with a united capacity to confront the enemy. They carry in their cargoes many useful loads…., some very useful, but not so far a force to which governments or even some large NGO's will pay much attention." John Smyth, Scotland *"Do not touch it... its working! People are responding - the level of the debate is fantastic - it is time consuming but we are moving forward. The structure is great. It is one of the easiest debate I have had online since the invention of Internet - it will become a model for future discussions. I love the synthesis and the graphs - Congratulations to the organizers and the web master."* Jean Perras, Canada

Leads for the future

One of the conclusions one can draw from the experience of ESDebate is that on-line debates have a future. As a direct off spin of ESDebate, the format is used in two projects of the Wageningen University: '*Education for Integrated Rural Development*', and '*Integrating Concepts of Sustainability in Education for Agriculture and Rural Development*'. Furthermore debates like ESDebate provide opportunities as a preparation for workshops , seminars and conferences: participants come well prepared, know each other already from cyber space and are 'fired up' for a lively real debate.

Other applications of ESDebate can be found in the area of distance learning. Already during the debate the University of Leiden used ESDebate as a learning exercise for its students. One could also imagine students moderating in small groups a round in the discussion (preparing questions, analyzing answers and formulating a synthesis).

ESDebate also offers an emerging internet format for expert consultations for social marketing and interactive planning. Especially on issues with an international dimension. International organizations with a mission in the field of sustainable development could use the format to investigate their clients ideas about the existing products and services and could

explore the added value of new services and products. When planning their programs or activities these organizations could use the ESDebate format to generate input of key stakeholders from various parts of the world.

For more on the ESDebate visit: **http://iucn.org/themes/cec/esdebate/**

About the authors:

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