

## **Between Tradition and Modernity**

### *Sustainable Development by Changing Perspectives*

If there is one thing that I have learned about sustainability in the past year, it is that it is not by accident that the theme is on the agenda now. The 'now' in this last sentence does not refer to this specific year (although there are plenty of good reasons to think about sustainability in 2005). Rather, it refers to the current era, a now in sustainable context, so to speak.

The discussion about sustainability probably started in the 1970's with the report of the 'Club of Rome'. It put a lot of people to think about sustainability, but it also triggered doubt and resistance. And maybe that doubt and resistance was not so much about the 'limits to growth', but more so about the limits of the dream of the Enlightenment: that we as humans can take charge of our future, and shape it. It is not a dream that can be limited easily.

### *Enlightenment*

'The idea that we can control nature through science and technology was the kind of belief that fuelled the expansion of western industrial civilisation and the journeys of explorers across the world. [...] In traditional cultures there is a sense in which there is no notion of the future as a separate temporal domain because the future looks very much like the past. But with the rise of modernity you have a society bent on changing the future. The Enlightenment philosophers saw the future as a territory which you can colonise and occupy. You can thereby shape history to human purposes and get away from God and dogma and from the influence of the past to shape the influence of the future' (Giddens, 1999).

I find this an interesting thought. Only through the notion that we have influence or even control over our future - it being not just god-given - 'future' becomes a separate category in time. Ironically, the very technology and scientific achievements that have given us more control over our future have now made it necessary to put sustainability on the agenda. Sustainability is about the non-intended effects of technology and science, it is about the limits of our knowing and our control. From the 'limits to growth' to the limits to our influence.

### *Tradition*

There is a third limit to be added: the limits of tradition. Although technology and science were primarily about our control over nature, they also had an influence on how our societies are structured, and even on our personal lives:

'The public spheres of democracy and the economy were dragged away from traditional modes of belief and practice, which was a key part of what Western societies had become. In the spheres of personal life – family, sexuality, and the body – these things remained heavily traditionalised. The role of women in Western societies, for example, remained as it was until relatively recently when women began to enter the labour market in large numbers and to question their traditional roles. There was a process of de-traditionalising public institutions which now, much later on, is being followed by a process of the de-traditionalisation of personal life – of marriage, the family, sexuality, of our experience of self and body in a Western culture' (Giddens, 1999).

Sometimes I believe that my passion about sustainability is connected with a desire for a new form of tradition – more so, with the desire to bring tradition and modernity together.

## *Facets*

And so sustainability has become an issue. In many conversations with fellow HRD professionals in the past year, we have identified many aspects and facets to the theme:

- ▼ Sustainability aimed at the environment: how do we keep our planet habitable for the next generations? And, linked to that the sustainable development around social issues – how to ensure that people can survive and live together peacefully, how can we ensure sustainable development of poor countries in the South?
- ▼ Sustainability translated as ‘long term thinking’. In this sense sustainability could also be about the development of your organization or company so that it survives, and that it is still relevant in times of change.
- ▼ Sustainable development as a design principle for learning interventions: how do we shape learning so that it remains relevant in a rapidly changing world?

The overarching question here is: is there a relationship between these facets or is it just a game with word – ‘sustainable learning’ and ‘learning about sustainability’? Is there a connection between sustainability and HRD?

## *Survivors*

In a speech during the ASTD-conference in Washington D.C. in 2004, former Shell executive Arie de Geus elaborated on the study that Shell had commissioned on the survival of corporations. The background of this study was that the oldest corporation in the world has reached the ‘respectable’ age of 700, while the average age of a corporation in our age is about 20. ‘What a waste of potential’ would be the outcry if this was concerning a biological specie. In addition, the long-term survivors in the study – corporations older than 100 years – turned out to be 15 times as profitable than the companies that were focused on the short term.

The study showed that there were four different characteristics that the long-term survivors shared:

- Conservative financing
- External orientation of management (involved with the community)
- Sense of cohesion and shared identity with all employees
- Tolerant leadership style where there is a lot of space for others

To me, in this list lies the missing link between all the previously named facets of sustainability. If you want to survive as a corporation, you need to ensure involvement with the community or communities around you – as a multinational, that community is the world. It is about the sustainability of your production, of how you deal with social and environmental issues. Dealing with these aspects well will certainly contribute to cohesion and a sense of shared identity.

And if you then think about what a tolerant style of leadership could entail, I would think that it is about fostering the development of people in your organisation, so that they can take up more and more responsibility. All of this not because we find sustainability a fun topic, but because it contributes to the survival of your organisation in the end. To me, this is the ‘business case’ for

sustainability: because it makes you a long-term survivor, not because of the nice press it gives you in the short term.

## *HRD*

To close: how would you translate such a focus on sustainable development in your practice as an HRD professional? – To me, the essence lies in developing perspectives that are one level further than the here and now. What makes this world so complicated is that our actions have ever more far reaching consequences in space and time. Many of the choices we make today will be felt by future generations, and many of the choice we make here have consequences for people far away, living in other parts of the world.

If our thinking is to develop hand in hand with the globalising world, we need to learn to involve ever more far reaching consequences in our considerations; that is sustainable. But it's also quite hard. Many of us are not even able to act sensible if the long term consequences involve ourselves – just observe our bad eating- drinking- and smoking habits. The short term benefits usually win the battle against what is good for us in the long term. This not a moral proposition, but the painful insight that it is hard to give the effects of our actions in the long term and in the long distance a decisive voice in our considerations.

However, as HRD-professionals wanting to contribute to sustainability, we could agree on something. In every learning activity that we design or facilitate, we could entice people to think one level further. Always create the space to think from a different perspective than your own and to see yourself also as part of the whole. For example: the distribution people looking beyond their immediate function, also taking into account the needs of production and sales.

Just taking one step further in our thinking than we would usually do. To me, that seems like a good start to sustainability.

## *Literature*

Giddens, Anthony, *Runaway World: The Reith Lectures revisited*, London: Profile Books, 1999.  
Internet: [www.lse.ac.uk/Giddens/lectures.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/Giddens/lectures.htm).

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