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The 2012 Imperative Teach-in for Ecological Literacy in Design Education

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The 2012 Imperative is a transformative learning project with the ambitious objective of embedding ecological and sustainability literacy in design education by 2012. The project was launched with a 'Teach-in' which took place on 12 October 2009 in a large lecture theatre at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London. Sustainable education will depend on an ecologically literate educational paradigm, but making this shift is a daunting challenge. Stephen Sterling's work on transformative learning suggests that a participatory approach to learning is necessary in order to effect the change in attitudes and behaviour required to integrate sustainability into formal education. This case study will describe the 2012 Imperative Teach-in and report on progress towards the project's goals. For background information please see the website: <teach-in.ning.com>.

The 2012 Imperative Teach-in had the following aims:

- Create a learning process that engages an ecological view of education (i.e.

one that that is relational, holistic, participatory and practical).

- Engage with real problems; transform institutions, systems and communities while creating a transformative learning experience for individual participants.
- Launch the 2012 Imperative; a framework that aims to embed ecological literacy into design education by 2012.

Ecological literacy is an understanding of the principles of organisation that ecosystems have evolved to sustain the web of life (Capra, 2002). It also implies an awareness of the interdependence between ecological systems and human systems. Ecological literacy is recognised by many educators as a foundational element for a shift to sustainability. Each discipline must transform its theory and practice to make sustainability a reality.

Environmental education is not as simple as transmitting information about environmental issues. This is because information alone

does not necessarily lead to change. Stephen Sterling explains that 'not only does it not work, but too much environmental information (particularly relating to the various global crisis) can be disempowering, without a deeper and broader learning processes taking place' (Sterling, 2002). Sterling describes a four stage learning process in an engagement with sustainability education:

1. no change (no learning: ignorance, denial, tokenism)
 2. accommodation (1st order - adaptation and maintenance)
 3. reformation (2nd order learning - critically reflective adaptation)
 4. transformation (3rd order learning - creative re-visioning)
- (Sterling, 2002)

The Teach-in attempted to create conditions for transformative 3rd order learning. Transformational learning was first developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s and has since been developed into a powerful pedagogic practice that helps learners develop the agency to act on the basis of new beliefs. Transformative learning is complete when an individual is able to act according to beliefs he or she has validated through critical reflection (Mezirow, 2009). This deeper orientation is needed to allow learners to re-access basic assumptions in regards to the systemic roots

of environmental problems. This learning process creates a foundation for the ecological literacy necessary to enable designers to create suitable solutions.

The Teach-in was advertised widely as a student conference and developed over the period of a year with the help of a board of advisors from several universities and across design disciplines. A total of 275 people came to the Teach-in at the V&A. These were mostly groups of undergraduate and graduate students from at least six different universities. Meanwhile the entire event was broadcast live online (several universities organized mass viewings). All design disciplines were represented in the audience; for example, architects, product designers, fashion designers, and communication designers. The project explicitly aimed to work beyond traditional disciplinary silos.

Evaluation of the Teach-in process has been aided by three different surveys and feedback forms distributed both before and after the event. Over 110 completed forms have been collected. Additionally, feedback and emails have been received from participants throughout the Teach-in project and some feedback has been posted on the Ning collaborative site. Results from the surveys are published on the Teach-in website.

Working towards helping learners engage with complex ecological ideas, and ultimately transform learning paradigms, is a goal that will not be accomplished with one event; however, the Teach-in did function to raise the profile of ecological literacy and create a space for a deeper analysis of the structural issues that must be addressed as we confront environmental problems. We received some feedback that expressed frustration with technical problems and logistics at the event and we admit that the Teach-in struggled from the beginning (owing to financial restraints). Despite four decades of work by environmental educators who have been steadily building the research base and the ever growing ecological crisis, financial support for projects working towards structural change for environmental sustainability is still shamefully inadequate.

In light of converging ecological crises, educational institutions must equip students with the skills and knowledge base they will need to respond to current challenges. While the Teach-in's aim to make ecological literacy normative through a process of transformative learning is far from accomplished, a small step towards the goal has been achieved. The 2012 Imperative was presented as an ongoing project and as a framework for change in design education. It is intended that the participatory approach will

encourage collaboration in the design of a new sustainable educational paradigm. A collaborative network with over 300 participants and 20 institutional groups has been established online to facilitate this process. Videos of presentations at the Teach-in are posted at <teach-in.ning.com/>.

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Biography

Jody Joanna Boehnert is an AHRC funded PhD candidate at the University of Brighton (to be completed in late 2011). Her research topic is the visual communication of ecological literacy. She is also founding director of EcoLabs, www.eco-labs.org, an ecological literacy initiative. In 2009 EcoLabs held a teach-in at the V&A in London. She lives in London.