

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Sustainability: Principles and Practice

Margaret Robertson, Earthscan, London, 2014, 370 pp., ISBN 9780415840187 (PB), 9780415840170 (HB), 9780203768747 (ebook)  
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Reviewed by Debbie Prescott, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia.  
Email: [deborah.prescott@cdu.edu.au](mailto:deborah.prescott@cdu.edu.au)

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This is a comprehensive book covering the interdisciplinary field of sustainability. Overall, it presents a narrative, from ‘A Brief History of Sustainability’ through to ‘Working as Agents of Change’, in multidisciplinary contexts. Often overlooked in other books, this is a comprehensive history and background of the field. Robertson supplies a context and sets the scene for the definitions and explanations to follow.

Some of the ideas that appeal to me in Robertson’s book are emphases on communication for change and the impact of language filters on our thinking. Ecolinguistics is not a particularly new field of linguistics, but it is not frequently recognised as necessary for making changes in the environmental field.

Another compelling idea in this book is the need for collective dynamics and collective learning. Robertson recognises the complexity of human networks and their ability to make political changes and build resilient communities. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2015) also question the assumption that the individual is the basis for all change activities, especially transformative ones, and that ‘a collective can be vastly more intelligent than the most intelligent agent in the collective’ (p. 66). Robertson points out in the preface and throughout the book that the sustainability field is more diverse than any one area of expertise.

At first glance, however, this book appears to follow traditional divisions, with wide-ranging chapter headings such as ‘Water’ and ‘Green Buildings and Sites’. On further analysis, this categorised organisation — for ease of use, as Robertson notes — works to gain initial access to complex ideas. In order to fully achieve this aim, the book needs to be applied in context, and in the complex ways that the area of sustainability demands. This is the challenge for text users. The book could easily be approached in the traditional Chapter 1, page 1, page 2 . . . , Chapter 2, and so on. This linear reading must be resisted.

The structure of *Sustainability: Principles and Practice* also seems to adopt a heritage textbook format, with ‘Chapter Review’ questions that are similar to examination-type questions. In addition, each chapter has a ‘Critical Thinking and Discussion’ section in which Robertson asks possible insight-producing, thought-provoking questions; for example: ‘Why does “collective learning” appear to give the human species an adaptive advantage? Why is it important to sustainability?’ Some of the questions could promote complex problem-solving and thorough, reflective thinking, but this complexity and reflexivity could also be easily avoided. A more productive and creative way to approach the text might be to use it to frame a genuine, contextual problem, in collaboration with others.

Chapter 17, on education, makes some important points about children needing space and silence (not always achievable in schools) and natural environments being one of these spaces. Robertson states that the built environment sends messages to its inhabitants, including students, that the physical structures in which we study — the materials used, where the energy comes from, how water is used — send stronger messages about valuing environmental sustainability than the content of a textbook or of a subject area. In addition, the section on higher education problematises the ‘Cartesian’ model still predominating in education through structuring learning in disciplinary silos. Nevertheless, the brief sections on other age groups paint a less complex picture of learning.

I believe that the audiences for the book fall short of its declared ‘sustainability professional’ or ‘intellectually curious reader’, particularly because of its breadth of coverage of this interdisciplinary field. The book might perhaps be a useful starting point to newcomers to the field, but their curiosity must lead them towards more detailed political and economic applications, for example.

Robertson and Routledge are commended for this well-researched book. The bibliography is extensive and a strength of the book. Some references which might be included in future editions are: Morin’s *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future* (1999); Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler’s *Engaging Minds: Cultures of Education and Practices of Teaching* (2015); and Ferreira, Ryan, and Tilbury’s *Planning for Success* (2014).

I suspect that annual editions might be required, as ‘... the field of sustainability is still in a formative stage’ (p. xiv). The companion website (the online glossary is found here) might be a way to make additions and changes quickly and easily.

## References

- Davis, B., Sumara, D., & Luce-Kapler, R. (2015). *Engaging minds: Cultures of education and practices of teaching* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.
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- Morin, E. (1999). *Seven complex lessons in education for the future* (N. Poller, Trans.). Paris, France: UNESCO.

## Reviewer Biography

Debbie Prescott is a lecturer in the School of Education at Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory, Australia. Her research interests include how environmentally responsive pedagogies can be applied across the curriculum. She is teaching in undergraduate and postgraduate preservice teaching programs and has considerable experience in teaching English as an Additional Language/Dialect students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education.