Sustainable Development in Learning, Leadership and the Law: A Review Essay

Noel Gough[†]
La Trobe University

Abstract   This review essay offers a critique of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development through an appraisal of three recent texts. These texts explore issues of sustainability and sustainable development in the context of three different (but interrelated) discourses-practices, namely, (lifelong) learning, (educational) leadership and (environmental) law. The texts reviewed are:

Halsey, Mark. (2006). *Deleuze and Environmental Damage: Violence of the Text.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hargreaves, Andy, & Fink, Dean. (2006). *Sustainable Leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Scott, William A. H., & Gough, Stephen R. (2004). *Sustainable Development and Learning: Framing the Issues.* London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Sustainable Development: Is Definition Necessary?

Although this review critically appraises three texts, my focus will chiefly be on the two that have been published during 2006, the second year of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD). The earlier text, William Scott and Stephen Gough's (2004a) *Sustainable Development and Learning: Framing the Issues*, is a companion volume to their simultaneously published edited collection, *Key Issues in Sustainable Development and Learning: A Critical Review* (Scott & Gough, 2004b), which was very capably reviewed by Jeana Kriewaldt (2005) in a previous issue of this journal. I contributed a critical vignette to the companion volume, and thus risk the suspicion of conflict of interest if I review its sibling, so I will do little more here than refer readers to Mitiku Adisu's (2005) comprehensive (and freely available) review of Scott and Gough's book and make some connections between the issues they foreground and the contents of the two more recent publications.

Adisu (2005) begins his review of Scott and Gough's text by historicizing the concept of *sustainable development*.

> Twenty years ago "sustainable development" was a newly-minted notion. Unlike theorists of modernization and economic growth, the proponents of sustainable development promised that growth and environmental protection are not

[†]*Address for correspondence*: Professor Noel Gough, School of Outdoor Education and Environment, La Trobe University, PO Box 199, Bendigo, Victoria 3552, Australia. Email: n.gough@latrobe.edu.au

mutually exclusive and that one can have the cake and eat it too. Therein lay the charm – and the risk. The risk is in overlooking the fact that humans had, from time immemorial, a sense of the benefits of coexisting with the natural world and with each other. The charm is in that the new term engendered great optimism and created space for multiplicity of voices. Twenty years later, however, the promise remains as ambiguous and elusive as ever. Today, the respectability of the phrase is being contested by emerging definitions and by variant terms. Then as now, the focus of such inventiveness was decidedly to create awareness and improve the quality of life in a world of disparities and limited resources. Unfortunately, the minting of new phrases also favored those better disposed to set the global agenda (n.p).

Adisu rightly reminds us that we have already had two decades of sustainable development and that, as a concept, it remains "as ambiguous and elusive as ever". But his implicit positioning of the ambiguity and elusiveness of sustainable development as a matter of troubling concern puzzles me. Why should the "respectability" (a curious term to invoke here) of sustainable development be anything but "contested"? Although Scott and Gough (2004a) begin by treating sustainable development "*at least initially*, as a set of contested ideas rather than a settled issue" (p. 2, my emphasis) and "set precision aside and begin with working definitions which are as *inclusive* as possible" (p. 1, authors' emphasis), they nevertheless "see definition [of both (lifelong) learning and sustainable development] as a core process of the book" (p. 1). In other words, these writers (authors and reviewer alike) appear to be saying that contestation, ambiguity and multiplicity are conditions to be tolerated as we struggle to overcome them and eventually reach authoritative, stable and settled definitions. I agree with Adisu that Scott and Gough succeed, to a commendable degree, in bringing together many diverse perspectives on both learning and sustainable development "in an effort to make sense of the contradictory, the inconspicuous, and the time-constrained features of our individual and collective lives" (n.p.), but I also fear that they succumb to universalising ambitions by regarding contestation, ambiguity and multiplicity as problems to be solved (and which are, in principle, solvable) rather than as qualities that signal marvellous potentials for an on-going, open-ended fabrication of the world.

Thus I was not particularly surprised to find that poststructuralist thought is something of a "blind spot" (see Gough, 2002; Wagner, 1993) for Scott and Gough and that they very largely ignore the possibilities and potentials afforded by poststructuralism and deconstruction for thinking imaginatively and creatively about socio-environmental problems. Indeed, they completely ignore deconstruction and make only two cursory references to poststructuralism, firstly in a section on "Language and understanding; language and action' in which they conflate "post-modern" and "post-structuralist" (p. 26), and secondly in a section titled "Literacies: the environment as text" in which they uncritically reproduce an assertion they attribute to Andrew Stables (1996): "As structuralists and post-structuralists have pointed out, one way of looking at the world is to say that *everything* is a text" (p. 29; authors' emphasis).[1] This appears to be an extension (and a misinterpretation) of Jacques Derrida's often-quoted assertion that "there is nothing outside the text", which is in turn a somewhat misleading translation of "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (literally, "there is no outside-text"). But Derrida was not, as some of his critics insisted, denying the existence of anything outside of what they (the critics) understood as texts; his claim was not that "*il n'y a rien hors du texte*" – that the only reality is that of things that are inside of texts. Rather, his point was that texts are not the sorts of things that are bounded by an inside and an outside, or

"hors-texte": "nothing is ever outside text since nothing is ever outside language, and hence incapable of being represented in a text" (Derrida, 1976, p. 35).[2]

Poststructuralism invites us to approach questions of definition differently from those who take its importance for granted. For example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) characterise philosophy as the *creation* of concepts through which knowledge can be generated, which is very different from the approach taken by many analytic and linguistic philosophers who are more concerned with the *clarification* of concepts. One of their conceptual creations is what they call *"mots d'ordre"* – "order-words" – which are not commands but terms that link implicit presuppositions to social obligations and produce locatable effects:

> We call *order-words*, not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in the statement. Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a "social obligation". Every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly. Questions, promises, are order-words. The only possible definition of language is the set of all order-words, implicit presuppositions, or speech acts current in a language at a given time (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 79).

In his "Translator's endnote" to *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), Brian Massumi notes that *mot d'ordre* not only means "slogan" or "(military) password" in standard French but also that Deleuze and Guattari use it literally to mean "word of order", that is, to suggest a command as well as a word that creates a political order (p. 523). Similarly, Robert and Kerry-Ann Porter (2003) suggest that "order-word" signifies "the immediate, irreducible and pragmatic relation between *words* and *orders*" (p. 139), which can in turn be viewed in two ways:

1. Words or speech acts are pragmatically implicated in a *social order* or in forms of, what Deleuze and Guattari call, "social obligation". These forms of "social obligation" always presuppose *imperatives...*

2. Words or speech acts can perform an *ordering function*: that is, they can *imperatively* or immediately change the circumstances in which they are formulated (p. 139).

If we approach "sustainable development" as a speech act that performs an *ordering function* then we will not ask what sustainable development *means* (that is, we will not ask for a definition) but, rather, we will ask how it *works* and what it *does* or *produces* in specific locatable discourses-practices (such as the discourses-practices of lifelong learning in OECD nations). Thus, in the remainder of this review essay, I will consider how sustainable development works and what it does or produces in texts drawn from the somewhat different discourses-practices of school leadership and environmental law.

Sustainable Leadership

Sustainable Leadership by Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink (2006) is a very readable and persuasive book, rich in practical detail, with much of its evidence-base drawn from a large-scale study, conducted for and funded by the US Spencer Foundation, of educational change over three decades in eight secondary schools in New York State and Ontario, Canada (they also draw on two other studies funded by Ontario agencies). They argue that this detailed research, together with their interpretations of the

literatures of environmental and corporate sustainability, provides "concrete strategies for realising seven principles of sustainability in leadership and change in schools and school systems" (p. 18), namely:

1. Depth: Sustainable leadership matters.

2. Length: Sustainable leadership lasts.

3. Breadth: Sustainable leadership spreads.

4. Justice: Sustainable leadership does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment.

5. Diversity: Sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity.

6. Resourcefulness: Sustainable leadership develops and does not deplete material and human resources.

7. Conservation: Sustainable leadership honors and learns from the best of the past to create an even better future (pp. 18-20).

Each of these principles is followed by a brief explanatory paragraph within the introductory chapter and then is elaborated at length in seven subsequent chapters – one for each principle. The authors admit in their introduction that they have drawn selectively on the evidence provided by their empirical studies: "Instead of providing a systematic discussion of our research findings, this book draws on evidence and examples from the schools and districts in our studies to present analysis, insight, and some practical guidance for practitioners and policymakers" (pp. 21-2).

From the outset the authors explicitly locate their understandings of sustainability and sustainable development within the discourses of environmentalism, but their arguments for the relevance of these understandings to school leadership depend to a large extent on their deployment of allusion, analogy and metaphor. For example, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) write:

> The prominence and urgency of having to think about and commit to preserving sustainability in our environment highlights the necessity of promoting sustainability in many other areas of our lives. Foremost among these are leadership and education, where our consuming obsession with reaching higher and higher standards in literacy and mathematics within shorter and shorter time lines is exhausting our teachers and leaders, depleting and making it hard to renew the resource pool from which outstanding educators are drawn and turning vast tracts of the surrounding learning environments in humanities, health education, and the arts into barren wastelands as almost all people's achievements and improvement energies are channeled elsewhere (pp. 2-3).

Hargreaves and Fink seek to establish the relationship between environmental sustainability and sustainable leadership through a variety of rhetorical moves, such as suggesting that they share a number of values and moral commitments:

> Disparate and internally differentiated as it is, the environmental movement and its commitment to sustainability teach vital lessons for achieving sustainability in education organizations and other organizations, too: the value of rich diversity over soulless standardization, the necessity of taking the long view, the wisdom of being prudent about conserving and renewing human and financial resources, the moral obligation to consider the effects of our improvement efforts on others in the environment around us, the importance of acting urgently for change while waiting patiently for results, and the proof

that each of us can be an activist and that all of us can make a difference (p. 4).

In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the ordering function of sustainable development in Hargreaves and Fink's text is to provide a *moral imperative* for their principles of educational change and leadership. They are quite explicit about this – "Environmental sustainability is a moral imperative on which the quality of our lives and the future of our planet depend" (p. 4) – and constantly remind readers that this is what makes their concept of *sustainable leadership* superior to other change theories, such as systems thinking and complexity theory:

> Unlike systems thinking or complexity theory, the idea of sustainability is inherently moral... Advanced systems thinking is as useful in tobacco industries as it is in pollution control systems and as valuable for a totalitarian government as for a truly democratic one. It has no inherent moral purpose. In contrast, sustainability in its very substance addresses the value and interdependence of all life as both a means and an end. It is, by definition, a moral concept and a moral practice (pp. 17-18).

Analytic philosophers might find such claims a little disingenuous. The principle of sustainability *can*, like systems thinking, be applied instrumentally, but Hargreaves and Fink insist that a deep understanding of social justice is at the core of sustainability. *Doing no harm* extends beyond an organisation's members, clients or target population to other organisations within the community and society at large (so the idea of, say, a sustainable tobacco industry would be a contradiction in terms for these authors). *Sustainable Leadership* is a work of passionate advocacy that puts the concept of sustainability to work in a socially useful way and that is likely to reach a much broader audience than most books marketed to environmental educators. In a sense, Hargreaves and Fink have given sustainability new life.

Textual Violence: Sustainable Development and Environmental Law

Concepts such as sustainability and sustainable development do very little work in Mark Halsey's (2006) *Deleuze and Environmental Damage: Violence of the Text*. Indeed, "sustainability" is one among a number of terms that Halsey argues "should be subjected to rigorous interrogation and perhaps ultimately effaced from the lexicon of environmental struggle" (p. 61):

> one of the key purposes of this book is to offer a micropolitical account of the evolution of such taken-for-granted concepts as "Nature", "sustainability", and "environmental harm". For what law prescribes as permissible in respect of Nature, and *ipso facto*, what it deems to be ecologically criminal, is intimately linked to how such terms have been spoken of, imagined, and otherwise deployed over time. To believe other than this is to turn away from the ethical, and at times violent, dimensions that go along with speaking and writing the world (p. 2)

Thus, Halsey's book critically examines the process, impact, and ethics of naming nature, focussing specifically on the categories and thresholds used over time to map and transform a particular area of forested terrain, namely, the Goolengook forest block in far eastern Victoria, and the socio-ecological costs arising from these thresholds and transformations and ensuing conflicts. Although Halsey is a criminologist, his study is not specifically about "crime" or even "environmental crime":

It is instead about the ways such terms as "harm", "sustainability", "ecological significance", "value", and "right", have been coded, decoded, and recoded by various means, at various times, with particular results. Further, this is not a study about "justice" – at least, not in the transcendental sense of the term. But it is most certainly about the ways law marks the earth. More particularly, it is about the composition of the various knowledges law calls upon to justify its "justness", its "rightness", and its "comprehensivity" when it permits, for instance, the conversion of a 10,000 year old ecosystem into scantling for houses or paper for copying machines (pp. 2-3).

Halsey provides a very detailed account of the modes of envisaging and enunciating the particular geopolitical space now known as Goolengook forest block over time and the "violence" that make these visions and enunciations possible – the *violence borne by way of the slow and largely inaudible march of the categories and thresholds associated with using and abusing Nature*" (p. 3, author's emphasis).

Typically, accounts of the conflict over Goolengook (and other forest conflicts) are rendered as variants on David and Goliath narratives: greenies versus loggers, or greenies versus government, or sometimes loggers versus government. Halsey contends that stories based on such dichotomies fail to articulate sufficiently the subtleties and nuances contributing to forest conflict as *event* – as "something which is both a discursive invention (i.e. an object of our policies, laws, imaginings) *and* a body consistently eluding efforts to frame, categorise, think, speak – in short, *represent*, 'its' aspects" (p. 3).

Halsey applies poststructuralist concepts, especially the work of Deleuze and Guattari, to demonstrate that the conflicts at Goolengook are about something much more than "forests" (Australian or otherwise) – they also raise critical questions about subjectivity (who we are), power (what we can do), and desire (who we might become). The struggles at Goolengook also raise questions about the ontological consistency and ecopolitical utility of categories such as "we", "society", "global", "environment", "forest block", "old-growth", "truth", "harm", "right", "crime" and so on. Halsey clearly shows how the geopolitical terrain of Goolengook has been textually configured over time – by Indigenous knowledges, law, management plans, mining leases, etc. – and how, why and for whom this textual configuration "works".

Following Deleuze and Guattari, Halsey argues that places like Goolengook *become* – they are always already invented, fabricated, although they are no less "real" for being so. He suggests that the process of "becoming-known", "becoming-forest" (or, for that matter, becoming-uranium mine, becoming-housing estate, becoming-hydro-electric dam, etc.), and thus of "becoming-contested", is intimately related to what he calls four "modalities" of nature involving the way nature is *envisioned*, the way nature is *named*, the *speed* at which nature is transformed, and the *affect* (image, concept, sense) of nature that is subsequently produced (p. 229). These modalities always already harbour an ethic linked to the production of a life (or lives) and/or a death (or deaths). For example, the Australian Federal Government envisions "forest" to mean "an area … dominated by trees having usually a single stem and a mature stand height exceeding 5 metres" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992, p. 47). Envisioning "forest" in terms of trees exceeding 5 metres – rather than, say, 20 meters – has significant consequences for biodiversity, employment, resource security, research and development, and so on.

One of the great pleasures of Halsey's book, for me, is the clarity and comprehensiveness with which he demonstrates how the work of Deleuze and Guattari provides a means for keeping pace with the mobility of environmental problems by considering nature and systems of environmental regulation as discursively produced and contested. *Deleuze*

and Environmental Damage thus deserves a much wider readership than Halsey's fellow academic criminologists, because it does no less than engage readers in a new ethics for categorising and regulating nature, and thus challenges us all to reconsider what it is possible to say and do about environmental problems.

Keywords: education for sustainable development; UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

Endnotes

1. Scott and Gough add three other citations to Stables to authorise this assertion.
2. I am especially grateful to Tony Whitson (2006) for clarifying the implications of misleading translations of Derrida's (in)famous aphorism.

References

Adisu, M. (2005). Sustainable development and learning: Framing the issues (Book Review). *Education Review*. Retrieved 27 October 2006 from http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev422.htm

Commonwealth of Australia. (1992). *National forest policy statement*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Brian Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1994). *What is philosophy?* (G. Burchell & H. Tomlinson, Trans.). London: Verso.

Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Gough, N. (2002). Ignorance in environmental education research. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 18*, 19–26.

Halsey, M. (2006). *Deleuze and environmental damage: Violence of the text*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). *Sustainable leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kriewaldt, J. (2005). Key issues in sustainable development and learning: A critical review (Book Review). *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 21*, 129–130.

Porter, R., & Porter, K. (2003). Habermas and the pragmatics of communication: A Deleuze–Guattarian critique. *Social Semiotics, 13*(2), 129–145.

Scott, W. A. H., & Gough, S. R. (2004a). *Sustainable development and learning: Framing the issues*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Scott, W. A. H., & Gough, S. R. (Eds.). (2004b). *Key issues in sustainable development and learning: A critical review*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Stables, A. (1996). Reading the environment as text: literary theory and environmental education. *Environmental Education Research, 2*(2), 189–195.

Wagner, J. (1993). Ignorance in educational research: or, how can you *not* know that? *Educational Researcher, 22*(5), 15–23.

Whitson, J. A. (Tony) (2006). *Est-ce qu'il n'ya pas de hors-curriculum*. Paper presented at Curriculum as an International Conversation: The Second World Curriculum Studies Conference, Tampere, Finland, 21-24 May. Retrieved 18 May, 2006. from http://www.uta.fi/laitokset/okl/tokl/wcsc/WCSCAbstract.pdf