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# *Transformative Learning in Business Education*

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## **Background and Objectives**

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020, p.2) expresses a disconcerting fact that ‘the world is not on track to achieve the global Goals by 2030’. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres asserts that ‘global efforts to date have been insufficient to deliver the change we need...’ and therefore, ‘...a transformation is required in the financial, economic and political systems that govern our societies today to guarantee the human rights of all’. This fact appears disquieting because (natural) environment-based education now, is more than a century old (Dewey, 1907). The United Nations (2020) declares the centrality of higher education institutions (HEIs) as a force for positive change in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The strategic importance of HEIs for sustainable development arises from two unique opportunities (UNESCO, 2004): First, universities form a link between knowledge generation and transfer of knowledge to society for their entry into the labor market. Second, they actively contribute to societal development through outreach and service to society. HEIs are pivotal ‘in developing the principles, qualities, and awareness not only needed to perpetuate the sustainable development philosophy but to improve upon its delivery’ (Johnston, 2007).

The United Nations also acknowledged the need for partnerships within and beyond the HEI sector in *research, teaching, and community engagement*, which was ratified during a global event at the UN High- level Political Forum in July 2019, by three university organizations representing more than 2000 members universities worldwide —the *Higher Education Initiative Association of Commonwealth Universities*, the *Agence Universitaire de la*

*Francophonie* and the *International Association of Universities* (O'Malley, 2019). *Research* provides new knowledge and innovation for meeting sustainability challenges plus evidence for informed public policy. *Teaching* prepares future sustainability leaders for the environment, social, and governance (ESG) development. *Community outreach and engagement* enable collaboration with diverse stakeholders for generating positive impact locally, nationally, and globally.

HEIs can contribute to sustainable development at all three levels (Filho, 2000; Scholz et al., 2000, 2006)— *strategic* (developing strategic sustainability vision and goals), *tactical* (facilitating stakeholder coalitions), and *operational* (implementing change through research, curriculum design, on-campus activities, and co-learning with societal communities).

Against this backdrop, the primacy of business as a pillar of contemporary society (Kanter 2011, p. 66) is reckoned to make a case for integrating social constructivist “transformative learning” (Mezirow, 1978) with eco-literate business education in “civic universities” (Goddard, 2009) for achieving Agenda 2030 contextualized within a regenerative (non-linear) economy. This is the primary objective of our exploratory study, given that Planet Earth is the ultimate stakeholder of business (Stead and Stead, 2000). As a subsidiary objective, we examine how transformative learning with business ethics can stimulate ‘transformative engagement’ (UNESCO, 2019) for achieving the global Goals, by business educators and students. The pervasiveness of business education is discernible from data reported by 653 accredited schools responding to the AACSB Business School Questionnaire for 2016-17. Globally, the aggregate enrolment was approximately 1.9 million students. Of the total, about 72% of these enrolments were undergraduates, 15 % were at the generalist masters, 11 % were at the specialized master's, and about 1.5 % was at the doctoral level (Robinson, 2018). Furthermore, the AACSB’s 2020 standards require impact-based accredited business schools to create positive societal impact by integrating sustainability as a transversal theme for core skill development to educate ethical business leaders with a deep understanding of sustainability issues (AACSB International, 2020).

The temporal significance of this study derives from key findings of the *Learn for Our Planet* Report (UNESCO, 2021) presented at the World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in May 2021, deliberating the “cursory way” in which HEIs handle climate change and other sustainability issues, notwithstanding our self-indulgent unsustainable consumerist lifestyles. The Report aims to “embed sustainable development in

learning systems globally” through a new “*ESD for 2030*” framework that recommends a “whole-sector approach to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)”. Currently, progress towards ESD is fraught with governance, institutional, educator-based, and student-related barriers that can be overcome by training educators as change leaders through capacity building, policy modifications, adaptive learning environments, empowerment of youth, and speeding up local action (UNESCO, 2021). Four major recommendations in the *Learn for Our Planet* Report (UNESCO, 2021, p. 10) underpin our core argument—the need for: (i) integrating environmental learning across the curriculum to engage students emotionally, behaviorally, and socially in experiential action-oriented learning beyond a narrow cognitive focus; (ii) teachers at all levels to adopt ESD through transformative learning; (iii) inclusion of indigenous knowledge in environmental learning through broad consultation with indigenous groups; and (iv) collaboration among environmental and educational actors for rapid action with global benchmarks, regulations, policies, programs, and events.

### **Eco-literate Business Education for “Wicked Problems” of Unsustainable Design**

In the Anthropocene era, the “take-make-use-waste-dispose” model underlying our global economic system epitomizes an unsustainable human design problem. The degenerative (linear) logic of this model supports a “growth-at-all-costs” philosophy that incites unsustainable production and consumption on a finite planet. The resource base required for this is estimated as equivalent to three piles of the earth by 2050 (UNESCO, 2021). Despite available evidence that this model is dysfunctional, the powers that be dismiss them as overly “academic”; in fact, their unrelenting advocacy ensures the universality of this model as the foundation of mainstream business education, to presage an irreversible planetary crisis. Mintzberg (2004, p. 377) deplors ‘institutions imparting business education ... (which) attract high-paying students who clinch high-paying jobs, (but) these institutions of higher learning fail in their “fundamental purpose to enhance the quality of leadership in society. More recently, at COP26, Peter Tufano, former Dean of Saïd Business School, Oxford University, observed: There are lots of businesses and lots of academics but virtually no business academics at COP 26...We were missing in action (Tufano, 2021).

Compelling a consumerist society to curtail unsustainable consumption of planetary resources will spark resistance unless there is a transformation in human design philosophy. Essentially, problems of sustainability are “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) within interacting ecological, social, political, and economic systems that defy a unique definition and best-fit

solution. They cannot be confronted alone by an individual, company, or country, but have to be envisaged on a planetary scale and solved synergistically in a circular economy (Saïd Business School, 2019, p.6) for reducing our ecological footprint (Wackernagel and Beyers, 2019). Ironically, systemic “wicked problems” originate from a Cartesian “epistemological error” (Bateson, 1972, p. 17) of separating self and object in unrelated fragmentary knowledge acquisition that pervades modern reductionist education perpetuated by the unsustainable business model (Bocken and Short, 2021) of HEIs. This “epistemological error” is revealed through the following “six myths” (David Orr, 2004):

	<b>Myth</b>	<b>Reality</b>
1	Ignorance is a solvable problem.	Ignorance is unavoidable because knowledge advances.
2	Planet Earth can be managed with knowledge and technology	The complexity inherent in the interconnectedness of life systems on Planet Earth cannot be managed entirely.
3	Acquiring knowledge enhances human goodness.	Acquiring lucrative knowledge for success through ethically questionable means does not lead to wisdom.
4	We can satisfactorily restore what we have destroyed by fragmenting educational curricula into disciplines and sub-disciplines.	We have abandoned the wisdom of discerning unity in the interconnectedness of life.
5	The purpose of education is to provide opportunities for success and upward social mobility.	The purpose of education is to promote human flourishing, compassion, love, and moral courage.
6	Human culture represents the pinnacle of human development.	Human culture fails to nourish spiritual, aesthetic and principled aspects of human development.

Orr (2004) recommends an alternative approach to education for nurturing “ecological design intelligence” to inspire learners as conscious planetary citizens working in “healthy, durable, resilient, just and prosperous communities” instead of degenerating into “itinerant professional vandals”. To this end, he enjoins HEIs to pursue an overarching goal of ecological literacy (Orr, 2004). As co-learners, educators and students need to emerge from a “nature-deficit-disorder (Louv, 2008) and become “nature-smart” (Gardner, 2000, 2008) by integrating “emotional, social and ecological intelligence” (Goleman et al., 2012) to expand a learner’s capacity of empathy. Ecological intelligence improves understanding of natural systems by combining empathy for all life with cognitive skills. Thus, ecological literacy can enhance knowledge for sustainable living, while promoting academic excellence with reduced behavioral problems. A strong foundation for eco-literacy necessitates business educators to

foster five practices in students (Goleman et al., 2012)—(i) recognizing the interdependence of all life forms and developing empathy for all life, (ii) adopting sustainability as collaborative community practice, (iii) revealing veiled hazardous impacts of products, (iv) anticipating unintended consequences of perfunctory human behavior (e.g., use of fossil fuel technology) and (v) understanding nature’s processes of sustaining life.

Eco-literate business education is founded on regenerative whole-systems thinking, requiring business educators to espouse a world-view of regenerative natural life-cycles, and apply principles of the circular economy to design practice (e.g., design for durability, eco-efficiency, and disassembly) for a collective learning experience. Additionally, they must recognize that economies, financial systems, and business enterprises are “truly sustainable” if they function as regenerative energy flow networks, mimicking the universal principles governing Nature’s regenerative systems (Fullerton, 2015). The four inter-related elements (Fath et al., 2019, pp. 18-19) of nature-inspired regenerative economics are i) *circulation* (economic metabolism through continuous channeling of resources into self-feeding, self-renewing, and self-sustaining internal processes in education, innovation, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure); ii) *organizational structure* (markets, self-organizing communities, social systems, and complex human-natural systems); iii) *synergetic relationships and common-cause values* (e.g., reciprocity, trust, and fairness) for long-term collaborations and co-working among interdependent specialists in the larger interest of human communities and natural systems; and, iv) effective collaborative learning communities to promote planetary well-being.

### **Outcome-based PRME for Eco-literate Business Education**

HEIs offering business education has a “unique opportunity to advance the SDGs” ([www.unprme.org](http://www.unprme.org), 2020) through six Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiated by the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) in 2007 to encourage sustainability-driven business leadership. The PRME serves as a guidepost to equip students for practicing sustainable business. To hasten the achievement of Agenda 2030 targets, UN PRME entails HEIs to adopt SDGs in teaching, research, and thought leadership, signaling a shift from subject-oriented content-based learning to outcomes-based learning (Spady, 1994) with specific “intended learning outcomes”, as under:

<b>PRME Principle</b>	<b>SDG Orientation</b>	<b>Intended Learning Outcome</b>
<b>Principle 1: Purpose</b>	Commit to produce sustainability champions	To add value to modern business and society by equipping future business practitioners with tools to avail of sustainable opportunities
<b>Principle 2: Values</b>	Align the institution's values with the SDGs	To enhance the scope of education through strategic vision, mission, curricular development, and accreditation standards for aligning an institution's values with the SDGs encompassing all dimensions of sustainable development
<b>Principle 3: Method</b>	Make the business case for SDGs in curricular and extra-curricular activities	To create an interdisciplinary paradigm for teaching, learning and deep understanding of sustainability as core to the business model
<b>Principle 4: Research</b>	Engage faculty and student research to link with SDGs	To integrate SDG achievement through specific, time-bound and measurable learner-centred outcomes across all levels and activities of the HEI, and link them to financial drivers, value creation and future investment
<b>Principle 5: Partnership</b>	Work with other stakeholders to advance SDGs at national and local levels	To cover the entire value chain and connect with HEI stakeholders beyond the sphere of business
<b>Principle 6: Dialogue</b>	Reach out and share knowledge with others	To enable strategic stakeholder engagement of teachers and students for engaging with stakeholders and sharing learning and research-based knowledge with them.

(Source: [www.unprme.org](http://www.unprme.org), 2020 [adapted])

Intended learning outcomes such as systems thinking, eco-literacy, critical reflection, collaborative skills, and civic engagement have to encompass cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning domains by dwelling on real-world problems that manifest contextual differences, pluralism, reciprocity, respectful disagreement, constructive alignment, and non-dogmatism. The co-learning process should help develop and disseminate systematic knowledge about future sustainability concerns in advance, at least five years (Teichler, 2003, p. 172) to avoid “mismatch” vis-à-vis the socio-ecological realities of life on this planet.

### **Transformative Learning for a Regenerative Economy**

Outcomes-based business education for SDG integration rests upon three assumptions: (i) knowledge already exists in the minds of student-learners; (ii) teachers design methods as mentors to enable learning; and (iii) students and teachers are co-learners. It signifies an evolution from the “*driven by curriculum*” transmissive learning model of education to a



“*driving the curriculum*” transformative learning model that emancipates thought and understanding through a “deep approach to adult learning” (Saljo, 1979). Learning is approached with positive intentionality for human flourishing (Seligman, 2002) expressed as joy and innate curiosity to explore the big picture, rather than accept disconnected detail (Howie and Bagnall, 2013, p. 8). Students can, therefore, attempt a self-directed higher-order cognitive activity to ‘focus on underlying meanings, on main ideas, themes, principles or successful applications’ (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p. 24).

Transformative learning (TL) is a complex and multifaceted learning approach (Kitchenham, 2008, p.104) that encourages critical reflection to rectify distorted assumptions from prior (adult) learning. It produces “a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions” (Transformative Learning Centre, 2004) in the adult learner, and can be used effectively by teachers in HEIs to rethink their roles, engender personal transformation, and take responsibility for their actions inside the classroom (Moore, 2005, pp.88-89).

Mezirow (1978) is attributed with the most systematic endeavor to study TL among adult learners. Three of his major influences were (i) Kuhn’s (1962) paradigm, (ii) Freire’s (1970) conscientization, and (iii) Habermas’s (1971, 1984) domains of learning. Mezirow (1978) describes TL as “an orientation which holds that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is central to making meaning and hence learning.” It transcends knowledge acquisition to examine the approaches adopted for discovering meaning in an understanding of life. When new information challenges learners, they practice critical reflection to question previous knowledge, evaluate past understanding, examine new perspectives, accommodate new insights, and transform their worldview. TL decries non-reflective study that demands coping with course requirements and routinely memorizing unrelated facts. It embraces a social constructivist paradigm for individuals to construct knowledge through their experiences in the world (Candy, 1991; Cranton, 1994). TL represents an alternative learning culture compared with transmissive learning (König, 2015), and the differences are palpable from the following attributes:



Attribute	Transmissive learning	Transformative learning
Learning metaphor	Learning as acquisition and guided construction	Learning as self-transformation
Purpose and scope	Understanding defined cause and effect relationships	Personal transformation contributing to positive systemic change
Process	Transfer of information from experts	Action-oriented self-development process
Role of Teacher	Teacher defines meaning	Teacher facilitates construction of meaning among diverse groups
Teaching-learning events	Lectures, guided problem-solving, readings	Uncertain events, emotional experiences, reflection
Learning environments	Classroom and laboratory	Interaction with complex real-world learning environments in diverse constituencies
Ways of knowing	Strategies, tools, models, methods	Identities, purposes, meanings, aims, goals
Outcomes and impacts	Efficient reproduction	Shared actionable knowledge, transformed perspectives, and environments
Assessment and evaluation	Standardized testing	Self-evaluation and critical support

There are three types of TL (Mezirow, 1985) —(i) *instrumental* (learners question *how* best to

learn the information for task-oriented problem-solving and evaluation of cause-effect relationships), (ii) *dialogic/communicative* (learners question *where* and *when* this learning could best take place to communicate their needs, feelings, and aspirations), and (iii) *self-reflective* (learners question *why* they are learning the information). Each learning type can be associated with four learning processes (Mezirow, 1985, pp.21-24; Mezirow, 2000, p.21): (a) “learning *within meaning* schemes” i.e., elaborating existing frames of reference with what is already known, by expanding or complementing present systems of knowledge; (b) “learning *new meaning* schemes” i.e., learning new frames of reference compatible with existing ones within a learner’s meaning perspectives; (c) “learning *through meaning transformation*” i.e., transforming habits of mind by increased awareness of specific assumptions underlying a distorted/ incomplete meaning scheme, and redefining the problem to address a contradiction that cannot be resolved through current or new meaning schemes; (d) “transforming *points of view*” i.e., changing one’s point of view “by trying on another’s point of view”, but not changing “habit of mind” (e.g., world-view).

Mezirow (1995, p. 44) emphasized *critical reflection* as distinct from *straightforward reflection* in TL. *Critical reflection* underlines the nature and consequence of one’s actions plus the related circumstances of their origin. Three types of reflection transform meaning schemes—*content reflection* (learning *within* Mezirow (1995, p. 44) emphasized *critical reflection* as distinct from *a straightforward reflection* in TL. *Critical reflection* underlines the nature and consequence of one’s actions plus the related circumstances of their origin. Three types of reflection transform meaning schemes—*content reflection* (learning *within meaning* schemes), *process reflection* (learning *new meaning* schemes), and *premise reflection* (learning *through a meaning transformation* within a set of meaning schemes). The first two produce “straightforward transformation. *Premise reflection* causes profound transformation (Mezirow, 2006) with the learner trying to validate the best judgment, either through objective *critical reflection* (narratives or action) or through *critical self-reflection* (narrative, systemic, therapeutic, or epistemic means).

### **Re-inventing the “Civic University” for SDG-Integration**

Among HEIs, universities, have a pre-eminent role in SDG integration, with nearly 214 million students enrolled in university education worldwide, in 2015 (United Nations, 2020). According to Statista (2021), India leads the world with 4381 universities, followed by the USA (3254), Indonesia (2694), China (2595), and Brazil (1349).

As globally distributed, loosely networked institutions open to new ideas, universities can adopt an expanding agenda of sustainability (Maniates, 2017, p.194) to meet Target 4.7 of Agenda 2030, i.e., ‘all learners (should) acquire the knowledge and skills (by 2030) needed to promote sustainable development’. However, paradoxically, they focus on competitiveness with the “disproportionate significance” (Hazelkorn, 2015) assigned to global institutional ranking as a mirror of academic prestige. They concentrate unduly on performance measurement to attract funding and dissociate themselves from the societal constituencies they are expected to serve (Gumport, 2000; Hazelkorn, 2015). Thus, in a post-growth world, universities face a triple coterminous crisis of hegemony, legitimacy, and institutional governance (Amaral, A., and Magalhães, 2003). For a conscious transition towards responsible eco-social education (Pulkki et al., 2020), universities must shun the “high-growth world” model and evolve into a “civic university” model (Goddard, 2009).

A civic university is a variant of the “engaged university” (Watson et al., 2011) that can advance transformative innovation in business education to fulfill the targets of global goals. In Goddard’s (2009, p. 5) view: ‘The engaged civic university provides opportunities for the society of which it forms part’ A holistic societal concern differentiates a civic university from the dominant entrepreneurial university model under academic capitalism that networks with business enterprises to seek funding advantages, and overlooks its key purpose of “civic engagement” that involves (APLU, 2015): (i) deployment of intellectual resources for socially relevant needs, (ii) active stakeholder engagement, (iii) synergistic reciprocal contributions between the institution and its stakeholders, (iv) stakeholder inclusiveness in decision-making, (v) co-learning environment, (vi) enriched learning experience through positive impacts on stakeholders, (vii) stakeholder trust for problem-solving, (viii) measurement of the quality of engagement through public accountability towards communities served.

The timely attainment of the SDG targets depends upon a reinvention of the civic university (Goddard, 2009, p.6; 2016, pp. 10-11) established upon the following seven dimensions—(i) strong sense of purpose clarified by “what it is good for”, (ii) active engagement with the wider world and the local community; (iii) holistic approach to “civic engagement”; (iv) integrated sense of location as a “living laboratory” irrespective of scale; (v) willingness to invest resources for generating positive societal impact; (vi) transparency of disclosure and accountability to stakeholders; and (vii) use of team-building, social innovation, and social media to explore novel approaches to collaborative work. A case in point is Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) in Scotland, the first university to adopt the SDGs in February

2017 as a guiding framework for its research strategy (Roy et al., 2020). GCU is committed to the motto of “University for the Common Good” as an answer to the question “What are we good for?”

### **Business Ethics for Transformative Engagement**

To augment sustainability competencies in civically engaged business learners, TL requires explicit delineation of ethical values that inspire program structure, course design, content development, and patterns of co-learning. As such, civic disengagement among students in mainstream business education stems from two factors—cynicism and apathy (Loeb, 1999; Jones et al., 2001), which inhibit voluntary adoption of the UNPRME-SDG framework.

To counter this, TL may be complemented with experiential learning to create ‘an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of experience and education’ (Dewey, 1938, pp. 19-20). Specifically, experiential learning in business ethics serves as an “inclusive paradigm” (Sims, 2002) for unfolding divergent responses to the learning requirements of ethics education in business schools. It can aid transformation in professed values, attitudes, and behavior in individual learners essential for transformative engagement. It encourages reflection on real-life ethical dilemmas, to inform students that ethical business leaders habitually raise reflective ethical questions at work when facing hard choices between “right and right” (Badaracco, 1997) owing to conflicts of interest among diverse stakeholders.

The capacity for critical reflection is core to “deep thinking” about the “justification of one’s beliefs” to “guide action” and to provide “coherence to the unfamiliar” (Mezirow, 1990). Systematizing critical reflection in business ethics entails a learner-centered framework that progresses steadily from pedagogy to andragogy and ultimately, to heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012). The teaching faculty have to play an increasingly “brokering role” (Wenger, 1998, p. 105) as facilitators at the interface, between the university and their academic work, for a smooth “consequential transition” (Beach, 2008, pp.42-43) of individual learners towards reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983, pp. 241-242) as they immerse themselves in unfolding opportunities of “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1987).

Experiential learning in business ethics is grounded in action-oriented experience at the affective/emotional level essential for meaningful behavioral change within an Environment, Society, and Governance (ESG) framework. It ‘validates the “subjective reality” by bringing the classroom back to life. Students come to the classroom as whole beings...’ (Monbiot, 2015), ready for “transformative engagement” (UNESCO, 2019) at the local level, in four different avenues: (i) *Duty-based engagement* for maintenance of existing institutions;

(ii) *Active participatory engagement* in existing institutions for shaping their policies; (iii) *Justice-driven engagement* for securing social justice including climate justice and gender equity; and (iv) *Liberatory engagement* for radical change from the mainstream way of doing things.

### **Concluding Observations**

Developing sustainability competencies through transformative learning in imparting eco-literate business education can prepare learners to resolve today's wicked problems of unsustainable living and flourish in a regenerative economy. For this, learning systems have to rework all the four pillars of education (UNESCO, 1996)— (1) *learning to be* part of the Earth by reconstructing our ecological identity, (2) *learning to live* in harmony with nature, (3) *learning to know* how to integrate the sciences, arts, and humanities to the ecological dimension so that knowledge constitutes the reality, and (4) *learning to do* ESG activities for transformative engagement.

Transformative learning can “transform” the learner through a proactive, self-directed understanding of ideas with knowing, doing, and feeling. Knowing helps the learner in critical reflection, systems thinking, and empathic understanding. Doing activates the learner in design thinking with solution-centered analysis, patterning, and presentation. Feeling challenges the learner to accept and balance multiple perspectives, values, and world-views by inculcating respect for life and Nature.

The extreme urgency of achieving Agenda 2030 evokes answers to three basic questions of implementation—Why? When? and How?”

**Why?** An immediate commitment to TL must be demonstrable through the cognitive, teaching, and social presence of business educators as members of a global Community of Inquiry (Garrison and Archer, 2000), to create a positive impact on a regenerative economy.

**When?** The time for TL in business education is now, to rapidly imbibe regenerative thinking and social transformation for a regenerative economy.

**How?** TL must be steadily functional at three levels—the individual level for developing regenerative leaders; at the organizational level for enabling business enterprises to serve the common good; and at the societal level to engage consciously in the transformation of business and society.