

Naturally resourceful: could your school be a Transition School?

David Hicks

David Hicks believes local and global issues are not just matters of the head but also of the heart. Here, he outlines why schools and communities need to address sustainability issues such as climate change and how we can start to think in terms of choosing preferable futures and taking positive actions.

Looking ahead

We need to create more sustainable economies and lifestyles because the old ways of working will not deliver the future our children deserve or want. Two of the most urgent issues facing the UK are the interrelated questions of climate change and 'peak oil'. Teaching about these issues presents a dilemma: while climate change is very much part of public consciousness, the notion of peak oil is not.

Children need to understand about climate change or, to be more precise, global warming, because it is affecting their lives now and will do so even more in the future. In the UK, they will need to learn how to adapt to a future characterised by hotter and drier summers, wetter and stormier winters and more extreme weather events. They need to know how to mitigate the effects of climate change, both at home and at school.

Similarly, we need to plan for a future in which we depend far less on oil. During the twentieth century oil was cheap and plentiful but that is changing (see Figure 2). The notion of peak oil (i.e. that oil production is about to peak, or may even have peaked already) requires the transition, possibly in quite a short period, to a post-carbon economy that few people have yet begun to think about or imagine.

Global learning

Our task as teachers is not to worry young people but to help them engage critically and creatively with changes that will continue throughout their lives. One way to do this is to present global learning as having four specific dimensions – knowing, feeling, choosing and acting. In Figure 3, climate change is the focusing issue.

It's my experience that the most important element of this process – the affective element – is omitted. Local and global issues are matters of the heart, as well as the head. Choosing and acting here are best seen in relation to what climate change scientists call 'adaptation' (what are the conditions we may have to adapt to?) and 'mitigation' (how can we help lessen the probable impact of global change?)

Dear Eco-team

Sustainable Schools

Having been at the recent Heads' conference on Sustainable Schools what I enjoyed most that day was your contribution. I was most impressed by the way in which you stood up in front of a large and important audience and coolly gave your presentation as if it was something you did every day! Many of my students would not have spoken as clearly as you did, so I really liked the way in which you gave your presentation.

But I also enjoyed, and was impressed by, all the things that you have been doing on sustainability at your school. When I watched you I realised how knowledgeable you are about these things and what excellent activists you are for a more sustainable future. Well done! I hope you will persuade lots of other people about the importance of what you are doing because you really inspired me.

Yours



Yes, this small group of children really moved me, lifted my spirits and made the world feel a brighter place. They spoke thoughtfully and with enthusiasm about their wind generator, solar panels and learning how to grow their own food. They knew the vocabulary of sustainability and were beginning to develop some of the skills needed to live in a future which will be very different from today – a more sustainable future.

In this context the guidance in *Planning a Sustainable School* (DCSF, 2008) is most

timely and needs to be taken up by many more schools. It says sustainability 'must be much more than recycling bottles or giving money to charity. It is about thinking and working in a profoundly different way'. What does this mean?

I believe one thing it means is that a more sustainable society is no longer a luxury (if it ever was) but a necessity. So any notion of sustainability requires a radical rethink of what a sustainable future might actually look like.



Figure 1. Upton Cross Primary School, Liskeard. Photo: Phil Rider/Lighthouse Images.

A positive vision

What does a future economy, no longer dependent primarily on oil, look like? Firstly, the scarcity and high price of fossil fuels will have forced us to drastically cut our wasteful use of energy. Secondly, energy efficient household appliances, transport and industry will be the norm. Thirdly, renewable sources of energy will have replaced gas and oil. This will require huge social, cultural and economic transitions; however, Sustainable Schools – with their eco-teams – are already laying the foundations.

Energy expert Jeremy Leggett (2006) argues that ‘it will be possible to replace oil, gas and coal completely with a plentiful supply of renewable energy, and faster than most people think’.

Looking at Figure 4, what can your class find out about each of these options? Which are in use near your school? Which could be used in your school? The pupils in Figure 1 are celebrating because their school was the first in Cornwall to have its own wind generator. None of these sources of power produce CO₂ and so do not contribute to global warming.

Facing the changes brought about by climate change and peak oil requires us to have a positive vision of the future (Hicks, 2007). By this I mean that children and adults need the opportunity to discuss, debate and identify what they feel the main features of a more sustainable school, community and society should look like. This vision acts both as a guiding star and a planning tool: if this is how our school/community needs to change, what do we need to begin doing now? This is the key task of education for sustainability, Sustainable Schools and indeed all schools. And, excitingly, it is happening in a growing number of local communities in the UK known as Transition Towns.

Transition Towns

There are already nearly a hundred such towns or communities in the UK and there might be one near you (www.transitiontowns.org). It starts when a small collection of individuals in a community comes together with the shared concern: ‘How can our community respond to the challenges and opportunities of peak oil and climate change?’ The next step is to involve a significant proportion of the community in addressing the following question: ‘For all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself, how do we significantly increase resilience (to mitigate the effects of peak oil) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of climate change)?’ Then the action begins (Hopkins, 2008).

Key areas of concern are identified and a series of interrelated projects set up on issues such as food, energy, transport, health, heart and soul, economics and

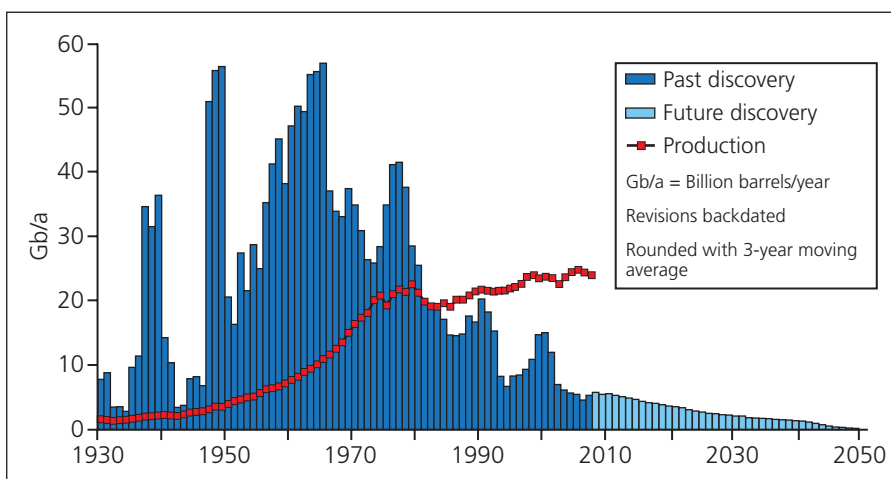


Figure 2. Oil discovery and production: the growing gap. Source: ASPO Ireland Newsletter No. 96, December 2008.



Figure 3: The four dimensions of global learning applied to climate change. Photo: Shaun Flannery.

What do we know/need to know about climate change?
What are its symptoms and its causes?
What are its consequences (probable futures)?

What are the options facing us?
What do I/we want to see happening (preferable futures)?
Which will I/we choose to work towards?

What do I/we feel about this situation?
What are the concerns we wish to share?
What are the hopes that we might have?

What do I/we need to do?
Locally, nationally and globally?
Who is able to support us in this?

Solar photovoltaic cells – putting PV roof tiles on all suitable roofs could generate more electricity than the UK already uses

Solar thermal technology – uses collectors which absorb sunlight to heat a liquid which can be used for both electricity and heating

Wind power – only a fraction of the suitable offshore sites would be needed to meet the UK's total current demand

Tidal power – gates and turbines installed along a barrage across an estuary or bay harness the power of the rising and falling tide

Wave power – a variety of turbines near the shore or offshore could tap the energy of the waves

Micro-hydropower – uses river currents; former mill sites in the UK could together generate as much electricity as one or even two nuclear or coal plants

Biomass – burning agricultural waste (straw), energy crops (fast-growing willow) and processed fuels (wood pellets made from sawdust)

Combined heat and power plants – produce heat as well as electricity and work at 80% efficiency (as against 30-40% in conventional power plants)

livelihood. This participatory and collaborative process results in an action plan for a low-carbon future, and a community 'transition timeline' (Chamberlin, 2009). These 'transition communities' are seedbeds for inspirational change.

The National Framework for Sustainable Schools proposes 'eight doorways' to sustainability (DCSF, 2008) and all of these – food, energy, traffic, waste, buildings, participation, local well-being and global interdependence – are being explored in a very immediate and pragmatic way by the Transition Town movement.

When faced with big issues such as climate change and peak oil it is all too easy to slip into apathy or despair, when what is needed is inspiration, hope and a positive approach. An empowering educational question is 'Where do we want to get to?'. Answering this question involves identifying features of one's preferred future, whether personal, local or global, and the resultant vision can direct our endeavours in the present. It is inspiring to know that all aspects of sustainability are being researched, practised, and celebrated in Transition Towns. Where is your nearest Transition Town? What part can your school play in

this process? What about becoming a Transition School and starting the process off in your own community? These are the 'seeds of hope' that we need to nurture so a future society is more, rather than less, sustainable. This is the debt that we owe to future generations, whether our children, grandchildren or those as yet unborn.

References

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Figure 4: Renewables – 'a big family of options'. Source: Leggett (2006).