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Cultivating a Sustainability Mindset Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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Sustainability, purpose, and pedagogy are my three passions. For me, they operationalize three grand questions of humanity: (1) Why am I here?, (2) What am I meant to do?, and (3) How will I do that? In my world, the first question relates to purpose, the second addresses the urgent action required by a planet we made unsustainable for ourselves, and the last question aims at the domain of my actionability: methods of facilitating learning.

Accelerating a Paradigm Shift

In his opening paragraph, [Stephen Sterling](#) sets the stage: Change is urgently needed, and time is short. Some fifteen years ago, a similar concern motivated me to explore whether there were core competencies of a mindset that predisposed for sustainability which could be intentionally developed. My findings yielded components related to knowing, thinking, and (to my surprise) being. They also were heterogeneous, as tends to happen with exploratory research; we often begin by tapping in the dark. With a pedagogical aim in mind, I grouped the findings into four content areas: Ecological Worldview, Systems Perspective, Emotional Intelligence, and Spiritual Intelligence.

The first pilot to convert the components of a sustainability mindset into learning goals took place in 2010 at Fairleigh Dickinson University for students in the Master's in Hospitality and Tourism program. The course, entitled "Developing a Sustainability Mindset," called for a blended learning approach. The intention was to go beyond the transfer of information: I invited students to explore what the data about the ecosystem meant for them in terms of feelings. This required balancing emotions with hope and empowerment, for which we implemented projects that would make a difference. It was important to transform intellectual content into something personal, by reflecting

upon how they each formed a part of the problems (albeit unintentionally). This led to an exercise in awareness by scrutinizing their own daily behaviors.

We also explored the thinking process: What were the thought patterns? Several scholars signaled the importance of systems thinking. In the classroom, we explored the mental models of the contemporary world. By reading the news through this lens, students discovered dualistic thinking behind polarized positions: “planet versus profit” and “agree or be wrong.” Overall, the students found a focus on short-term thinking, and they discovered—in political promises or marketing campaigns—the assumption of endless linear growth. As the semester progressed, students began to see how reality was being fragmented, contradicting the very interconnectedness that they were seeing more clearly with each passing day.

Values, beliefs, and assumptions are key components of a paradigm. To unpack these, we discussed the cost/benefits of the key values of the Western-Northern world, now globalized. What are the embedded disadvantages of wealth, comfort, competition, achievement, growth, and speed? What can we learn from the wisdom of our ancestors, spiritual leaders, or aboriginal knowledge? These exercises invited reflection and introspection. We prioritized depth over the quantity of content—it was more important to ask questions than to answer them with expertise. As one student wrote, “I came to learn about sustainability, and I am leaving with more questions than ever. But I think these are the right questions.”

Quickly, the course became personal. The safe space to have dialogues—sharing doubts or fears, hope and inspiration—was welcome. We seamlessly entered the content area of spiritual intelligence, without even naming it. Instead, I created exercises to experience oneness in nature, to reflect on their purpose, values, and priorities; and I introduced contemplative practices into the course.

Expanding the Impact

As a result of this first experiment, students spontaneously became advocates for a different mindset within their own networks. Inadvertently replicating what leaders had indicated during my research interviews, the students explained, “I cannot not do something! I have to act!” One student created a voluntary Graduation Oath, outlining a detailed commitment to the pursuit of sustainability values in students’ subsequent professional lives. They described the course as profound and transformative, a

statement that was repeated countless times over the next ten years as I continued teaching it. The new conceptual framework of the Sustainability Mindset provided the direction, holistic pedagogy created the how, and a mindset in action became the outcome.

Even I was surprised by the impact, since my hypothesis of the meaning of developing a sustainability mindset had not envisioned such results. And yet, after several years of teaching, Stephen Sterling's question inevitably came back: At twenty-five students per semester, how will I effect the large-scale paradigm shift that is urgently needed?

In 2014, I set out to create [LEAPI](#), a learning community, inviting colleagues with a similar passion to Leverage our resources, Expand awareness, Accelerate change, and Partner. Today, there are 167 scholars from more than fifty countries sharing best practices in the development of this new mindset, creating syllabi, publishing papers, writing books, and promoting a different approach to higher education. Given the diversity of this network the contents and approaches vary, adapted to the specific disciplines taught. The Sustainability Mindset is being introduced in a transversal way, with educators prompting their students to evolve from digesting information to exploring the thinking habits and behavioral patterns of their selves and the world in which they live. Some professors use the 12 Sustainability Mindset Principles (SMP) as the scaffolding to embed contents into their courses. The SMP were designed to provide footholds for educators to tackle the multidimensional and complex phenomenon of the Sustainability Mindset.

Education for a Great Transition

Do we prepare students for a better world, or should we help them shape it? Sterling is clear: It is as much about content as about pedagogical processes. We need critical reflection and transformative learning, projects, and dialogues if we want classrooms in which values and assumptions can be safely explored. The more holistic, the better. We have done good work focusing on intellect and cognitive abilities. Now it's time to balance the thinking with the being.

We have derived great progress through our confidence in human ingenuity and a paradigm that, as Sterling points out, prioritizes materialism, analysis, dualistic thinking, speed, cognitive understanding, technology, quantitative measurement, and reductionism. Now that the downsides are visible, we are awakening to things we always knew but neglected for a few centuries: to pay attention to context, relationships, inclusion, intuition, emotions, wisdom of the soul, and qualitative

understanding. This is none other than approaching students and each other in a holistic way. It calls for innovative approaches, like using projects, dialogues, art, and nature to make a difference, and has been spearheaded by pioneering institutions.

Inside the classroom, I witnessed firsthand the many times students pleaded to add hours of classes to a course, or invited friends to visit our classroom. In the real world, students have rethought their career goals and aspirations, changing their desired employers or becoming social entrepreneurs as a result of their paradigm shift.

We are indeed shaping the world we want, aren't we?

About the Author



Isabel Rimanoczy is an academic devoted to promoting change accelerators. She developed the Sustainability Mindset framework by studying business leaders who championed corporate initiatives with a positive impact on the environment and the community, and created the PRME Working Group on Sustainability Mindset, an international cohort of academics on five continents promoting a sustainability mindset with their students. She is the author of ten books, including *Stop Teaching* and *The Sustainability Mindset Principles: A Guide for Educators to Shape a Better World*. She holds a doctorate in education from Columbia University.

About the Publication

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