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Action Atelier

New Perspectives on Impact Learning

Forty years of efforts to shift towards sustainable higher education have had disappointingly little impact. This atelier builds on systems thinking to explore a different perspective on learning. Join us to explore a surprising new pathway preparing students for a complex and uncertain future!

Our Western economy and culture are deeply influenced by the money system, as almost all societal domains have been monetized and reduced to their 'monetary value' (or lack thereof). The scarce design of current money (controlled by banks) results in a means-ends reversal, whereby 'to make money' becomes the aim of all economic transactions, while people and planet are reduced to mere resources. This in turn has deteriorated the social fabric, for in a socio-economic system ruled by this kind of money, to look after one's individual interests and increase one's competitiveness appears 'rational', even if it unravels the fabric of social and natural life and is therefore self-destructive in the long run. Even Corporate Social Responsibility talks of a triple bottom line in which Profit (or 'Prosperity') is hard to reconcile with People and Planet. However, if the economy does not serve the prosperity of people and planet, whose prosperity does it serve, and why does society tolerate such a system to destroy the fabric of life?

This atelier explores what kind of learning it takes to heal from this deeply embedded and strongly institutionalized 'extractive economic culture', driven by private interests and exploitation of humans and nature. Current decentralized technologies (such as Blockchain) offer the possibility to circumvent banks and decentralize the creation of money. However, without a cultural shift, this may just repeat or even reinforce the private pursuit of financial gain through speculation (cf. Bitcoin). Only a cultural shift, allowing us to rediscover the value of community and relationships – with both human and other than human beings – as the true basis of life can give us the wisdom to reclaim our economies as efficient means to achieve the common good, i.e. leaving no one behind while restoring ecosystem health (as in the doughnut economy).

The atelier aims to present three learner-driven initiatives – the Young Persons' Guide to the Future (YPGF), Oikos International and Green Office (GO) - that allow young people to learn with their head, heart (reconnecting with life), and hands (empowering them to take their future in their own hands). As future generations know that the current system of higher education often overlooks their needs, Oikos International, Green Offices and YPGF-teams create communities of student change agents working towards transforming education for sustainability and empowering students to become

leaders in complexity. The purpose of the atelier is to critically discuss both the potential of this kind of learning and possible ways to let it scale.

The didactic approach of the atelier is based on cocreation of knowledge with participants, using a methodological framework (Mapping Innovations on the Sustainability Curve - MISC) based on a combination of Process Ecology (Ulanowicz) and systems thinking (Meadows). This facilitates a collective unraveling of systemic mechanisms keeping education locked into the extractive ideology. Participants then focus on emerging ‘niches’ of learner-driven pedagogies and brainstorm on potential leverages to increase their impact and foster the shift towards sustainable higher education (i.e. a shift from ego-centric to ecocentric values).

The workshop will start with a short exercise allowing participants to understand the complex dynamics of the Anthropocene. Mapping these dynamics against the laws of thermodynamics (making ‘ceteris paribus’ impossible on this planet) offers them a tool to visualise the co-evolution of life, and to understand why the current socio-economic model is not aligned with life on our planet. It analyses how (higher) education has been instrumental in fostering the extractive ideology, and what makes it so hard for HE institutions to change course, in spite of fifty years of scientific evidence that the current model cannot be sustained (the Limits to Growth report of the Club of Rome, 1972).

Secondly, it presents some learner-driven strategies that offer a high potential for by-passing these lock-ins and changing course swiftly (viz. oikos international, Green Office, and the Young Persons’ Guide to the Future).

Thirdly, the atelier critically explores the potential impact of these programs by mapping leverages with the participants. Since companies increasingly ask for workers that no longer come equipped with the ready-made answers of the past but are visionary people who can deal with complexity and cocreate alternative pathways, the demand for scaling this kind of learning is large. The condition, however, is that universities – as gate-keeper of higher education – have the courage to create this kind of learning spaces as a complement to the specialist, teacher-driven pedagogy. This atelier can be a pivotal moment in scaling this ‘bifocal’ approach to higher education.

