



# The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy

*instructions for authors*

**T**hank you for considering writing a chapter for *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy*. These notes explain the concept of the book, as well as giving practical details about the format. The maximum word length for chapters is 2000 words. Please send completed chapters by email to Arran Stibbe ([astibbe@glos.ac.uk](mailto:astibbe@glos.ac.uk)) by 1 February 2009.

**Vision:** *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy* is a provisional title intended to draw attention to two aspects: a) that this will be a concrete and practical book which is directly useful for teachers, and b) that the focus of the book is on the kinds of abilities, competencies, forms of knowledge, values, and attributes that may be useful for learners in adapting to the changing conditions of the 21st century and contributing to a more sustainable society. The aim is to stimulate thinking about educational transformation and open up a diversity of un-thought-of possibilities for teaching rather than to prescribe the ‘one true path’.

**Readership:** The book is intended for teachers who are concerned about the state of the Earth and threats to the wellbeing of people across the globe and are looking for inspiration for how to channel that concern into their teaching. Although the primary audience is lecturers in higher education, the insights in the book are likely to be relevant to a broad range of other educators in both formal and non-formal sectors.

**Publishing:** All chapters of sufficient quality will be published online in e-book format. In addition, a selection of around 25 of these chapters will be edited by Arran Stibbe and published as a paperback book with detailed introductory and concluding chapters. The publishing contract is with Green Books, an independent UK publishing company which produces books on a wide range of environmental and cultural issues, and the book will be part of their Autumn 2009 publishing programme. Chapters will be peer-reviewed and selected for the book on the basis of the accessibility of their writing and their practical usefulness to teachers.

**Focus:** A recent report, *Higher Education Looking Forward: an Agenda for Future Research*, criticised educational research for being overly abstract and theoretical and out of tune with wider changes in society. The ideal for the chapters is therefore that they avoid over-abstraction by including concrete examples, mentioning actual issues, describing practical teaching activities, and drawing terminology from the life-world rather than the academic-world where possible. At the same time, rather than just stating what is happening at a particular institution (another criticism in the report mentioned above), chapters will ideally explain why the ability/attribute being discussed is useful in helping students contribute to sustainability, and what educational principles underpin the approach.

**Tone:** What often gets lost in the abstractions of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is the seriousness of the current situation, and the actual factors which are undermining the social and natural systems that humans and other species depend on for life and wellbeing. Although each chapter will be different, the vision for the book as a whole is that it will express the realities that the world faces and their seriousness, while also being upbeat about the positive changes that learners can contribute to if they have the ability to respond effectively to the changing conditions around them.

**Chapter Layout:** The layout of the core chapters is envisioned as follows:

*Title:* this should be minimal, e.g., Permaculture Design, Dealing with Uncertainty, Self Reflection, Media Awareness, Working with Nature, Creativity, Care, Owning the Dark Side, Social Transition Skills etc.

*Author:* First name, surname, then a tag in any format e.g., John Smith, University of Oxford. Mary Smith, Human Ecologist. Peter Jones, author of ‘Towards New Worlds’.

*Brief Description:* a few words in a style that could be usefully inserted in formal documents like programme specifications or outcomes of courses.

*Main body:* The main body should explain the skill/competence/ability/attribute using concrete examples, show why it is important for adapting to the changing conditions of the 21st century and contributing to sustainability, and give some indication of active learning exercises which could help students gain the skill/attribute.

*Sources of further information and inspiration:* This section will include any references which appear in the chapter, as well as a few annotated resources which are inspiring, accessible and relevant such as readable books, documentaries, films, novels, or websites.

**References:** References should be kept to a minimum and focus on works which would actually be useful for teachers to consult. Please use Harvard style for citations (see sample chapter), and include the full reference in the *Sources of further information and inspiration* section at the end.

**Footnotes and subheadings:** Subheadings are not essential, but separate sections such as ‘Active Learning Exercises’, ‘Conceptual Underpinnings’, or ‘Conclusion’ could be useful if the chapter naturally breaks down this way. Please do not use any footnotes or endnotes.

**Diagrams and images:** Because space is at a premium, please use (black and white) line drawings/diagrams only if they serve a useful function in conveying messages. Embed diagrams into the document, with a caption if necessary. Diagrams may be moved slightly from their original location, so please do not refer to them as ‘below’ or ‘above’ etc.

**Word length:** The word length is a maximum of **2000 words** including the bibliography. This is deliberately short because the book aims to include a wide range of disciplines, ideas, experiences, opinions and types of activities. Chapters can therefore only be introductory, but can point towards resources where the reader can find out more.

**Terminology:** Please use the word ‘learner’ rather than ‘student’, and ‘educator’ rather than ‘lecturer’ because although the book is concerned most directly with higher education it may be useful for other educational sectors too.

**Sample Chapter:** A sample chapter is included overleaf to illustrate the layout.

## CRITICAL AWARENESS OF ADVERTISING

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The ability to expose advertising discourses that undermine sustainability and resist them

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Catching a glimpse into the deep insights about human needs that modern psychology has revealed requires little more than picking up the nearest magazine and critically analysing the advertisements within it. Since Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, first started applying his uncle's psychological theories to public relations and advertising in the 1920s, a significant portion of the effort of modern psychology has been applied to the task of convincing people to consume. A magazine advertisement for a vacuum cleaner reads:

Life isn't always neat and tidy. It's about laughing, crying, loving, dancing, maybe even shouting. So we've developed the new QuickClick tool change system and the ComfoGlide floor tool, to save you energy and time to enjoy what we've all been put into the world to actually do. Live. (Kärcher advertisement 2006)

Bernays' vision was of harnessing humans' dangerous and irrational desires and libidinal energies, like the desire to laugh, cry, love, dance and shout, perhaps, and channelling them into something safer and more economically productive, like buying and producing vacuum cleaners (see Curtis 2002). It is easy to see how Bernays' ideas could arise in his historical context: a deep suspicion of human emotional drives following the rise of the Nazis, and, after the war, a massive over-production capacity that needed to be met with increased consumption. Indeed, Hitler used the deep human desire to feel part of nature to stir up patriotism and xenophobia (Lee and Wilke 2005), so why not use images of the great outdoors to sell harmless cigarettes and cars instead. The context now, though, is very different, as over-consumption and the ecological damage it causes threatens the future ability of the Earth to support human life and the life of many other species.

Despite the change in context, the legacy of Bernays exists in a clearly identifiable discourse of modern advertising. This discourse calls on deep human desires and needs to sell people unnecessary things which will not, in the end, come close to satisfying those needs. A vitamin advertisement shows a woman deeply peaceful in a yoga posture, but suggests 'For the inner journey, take an alternative route.' The question is why buy a product which is unlikely to lead to a deep state of peace, with money that needs to be earned in a stressful job, when all that is necessary is some time out and a few stretches to actually feel more peaceful. Another advertisement, for bathroom cleaner, shows a glorious picture of nature but then suggests 'Enjoy the freshness of the outdoors in the safety of your own home', as if the synthetic aromas of a bathroom cleaner are a convenient substitute for the freshness of nature. A cigarette advertisement shows a man in a business suit sitting in the sea with a relaxed expression, then riding a bicycle in nature with joy on his face. 'Life. Full On' is the message, as if cigarettes can give stressed businessmen the same feeling of relaxation and joy as being on a beach or riding through nature on a bicycle.

Countless advertisements use images of happy times spent with friends, exercise in the fresh air, explorations of nature, peaceful moments, romance, and other things which in themselves require very little or no consumption of resources or production of waste. They then use these images to sell material products which are often not only unnecessary but ecologically damaging to produce and dispose of. Advertisements are therefore useful materials for stimulating reflection on ways of genuinely fulfilling higher human needs, the forces which distract people away from these towards unnecessary material consumption, and possible ways to resist these forces.

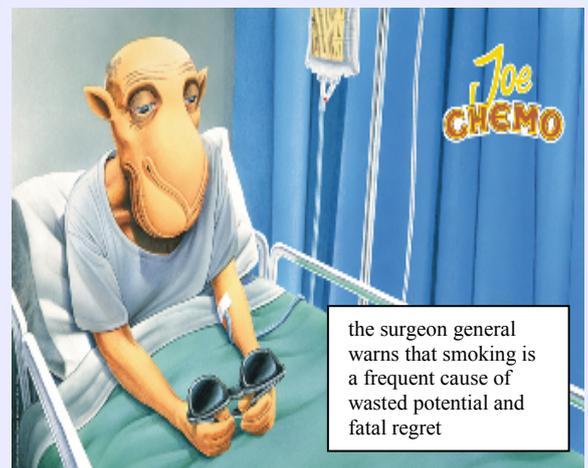
The particular discourse described above could be called the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse since the advertisements unrealistically represent a material product as a substitute for, or path towards gaining, something that will satisfy deep human needs. Learners can actively explore this discourse for themselves by searching through magazines (particularly the kind of magazines they typically read), and selecting advertisements which depict experiences they consider to be life enhancing. This is a valuable process in itself because it requires reflection on higher human needs and their fulfilment. Learners can then expose the model behind the discourse by expressing it in their own way (e.g., “material consumption is the path to deep fulfilment”). The validity of the model can be investigated at a personal level through visualisation exercises such as imagining the feelings that arise from being in the places depicted in the advertisements (in nature, spending happy times with friends, close moments with family, dancing, being physically active, discovering romance etc.), compared to what the products themselves (toilet cleaner, sugary drink, junk food, vacuum cleaner, trainers, perfume) can actually deliver.

Fundamental to sustainability literacy are questions of the *consequences* of discourses for the sustainability of society (Stibbe 2008). In this case, the consequences are not only in terms of the ecological impact of the products, but also on the social sustainability of generating material aspirations that are unfulfillable for all, as well as personal sustainability of a life of over-consumption, debt, clutter and stressful work to pay for it all. Another essential aspect of sustainability literacy is the ability to take *action*, in this case the ability to resist the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse. Resistance could be at a personal level by avoiding products which are unlikely to satisfy higher human needs, and searching for genuine satisfiers instead. At a social level, resistance could take the form of raising public awareness of the negative impact of advertising, or campaigning against certain forms of advertising such as those which try to associate junk food with family love in the minds of children.

One exercise which involves learners in learning-through-action (i.e., learning through actual awareness raising activities rather than just ‘exercises’) is the creation of a public exhibition of counter-advertisements along the lines of *Adbusters*.

### Example Group Activity

- a) Look through the Adbusters spoof advertisements (<http://www.adbusters.org/gallery/spoofads>) and discuss the kinds of discourse that are being resisted, the reasons for resistance, and the visual and linguistic techniques used to create the spoofs.
- b) Now look through ordinary magazines to find an advertising discourse that you feel needs to be resisted from a sustainability perspective. Discuss what it is about the discourse which potentially undermines sustainability.
- c) Create a spoof advertisement for public display which resists the discourse.



For the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse, spoof advertisements could be created by simply altering slogans of actual advertisements so that they promote the life-enhancing, low consumption activities that the advertisements actually depict, rather than the product. A cola advertisement which shows friends having fun together could be changed from ‘Coke is it!’ to ‘Time with friends is it!’; ‘Enjoy the freshness of the outdoors in the safety of your own home’ could become ‘Enjoy the freshness of the outdoors’; ‘For the inner journey, take an alternative route’ could become ‘For the inner journey, stretch your body and relax deeply’. In general, there are many genuinely satisfying and completely

free experiences which could be promoted for general health, wellbeing and sustainability, but it is exactly these which are excluded from advertising because no-one profits in an immediate financial sense. This is clearly one of the forces behind the unsustainability of society, but one that learners can become actively involved in resisting through exercises such as this.

The *pseudo-satisfier* discourse is, of course, just one of the discourses within the world of advertising with potential implications for sustainability. There are many others, such as the *dissatisfaction-manufacturing* discourse ('Discoloured toenails? Now there's no need to hide them'), the *convenience-constructing* discourse ('Royal Grass makes gardening a pleasure' from an artificial grass advertisement), the *Greenwash* discourse ('By changing to a supplier that produces electricity from renewable sources you are taking one of the biggest steps you can to...fight climate change'), and even a climate change denial discourse (see <http://climatedenial.org/>). All of these discourses have particular models of the world behind them. The *convenience-constructing* discourse reproduces a model where physical activity (mowing the grass) is 'inconvenient' but stress and ill-health from sedentary work in order to afford a life of over-consumption is not. The *Greenwash* discourse implies a model where sustainability requires only small (and often highly irrelevant) changes which have no impact on lifestyle, culture or political organisation, such as buying a car which is slightly less environmentally damaging.

It would not be possible for learners to be 'taught' the many discourses of advertising because they are in a continual state of change, and each learner will have their own evolving model of sustainability to gauge discourses against. Instead, learners can gain the skills necessary for active engagement with discourses in ways which take the impact of discourses on the sustainability of society into account. Four main stages can serve to summarise what this kind of engagement entails: *recognising patterns*, *exposing underlying models*, *reflecting on the consequences of models for sustainability* and *taking action*. The fourth stage consists of resisting discourses which are perceived to undermine the sustainability of society, or promoting discourses seen as potentially enhancing sustainability. An important precursor to deconstructing advertising discourse consists of asking fundamental questions about exactly what sustainability is and about desirable futures for society, otherwise there would be no basis for judging whether discourses are perceived as enhancing or undermining sustainability. Importantly though, critical engagement with discourses is itself a way of further developing a framework for sustainability because of the reflection that it necessarily involves.

To summarise, then, this chapter looked at the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse in advertising, and described some forms of active learning for investigating and resisting it. Exploring this particular discourse is valuable in itself because learners can go beyond awareness of how advertising promotes ecologically damaging over-consumption, to reflection on genuine, non-consumptive ways to fulfil higher human needs. It also provides a starting point for gaining broader sustainability literacy skills in engagement with discourses based on the four stages: *pattern*, *model*, *consequences for sustainability* and *action*. Overall, a discursive approach like this is intended to involve learners in critical awareness of and active engagement in the social structures around them that ultimately determine whether the society they are part of is sustainable.

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Achbar, Mark and Jennifer Abbott and Joel Baker (directors) 2005. *The Corporation*. New York: In2Film [This inspiring documentary explores the psychology of corporations as well as psychological techniques used in advertising]

Adbusters. available [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org) [Includes spoof advertisements and the *Journal of the Mental Environment*]

Curtis, Adam 2002. *Century of the Self* available [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) [This acclaimed BBC documentary examines the rise of the all-consuming self against the backdrop of the Freud dynasty]

Language and Ecology Research Forum. available [www.ecoling.net](http://www.ecoling.net)

[The online journal *Language & Ecology* contains analyses of a wide range of discourses from a sustainability perspective, and the 'Courses' section features feedback and examples of the work of learners conducting similar analyses]

Lee, Robert and Sabine Wilke 2005. Forest as Volk: Ewiger Wald and the Religion of Nature in the Third Reich. *Journal of Social and Ecological Boundaries* 1:1:21-46

Fairclough, Norman 2001. *Language and Power*. London: Longman [Includes a useful Critical Discourse Analysis approach to advertising]

Stibbe, Arran 2008. Words and worlds: new directions for sustainability literacy. In Walter Filho, Evangelos Manolas (eds) *Higher Education and the Challenge of Sustainability: Problems, Promises and Good Practice*. Orestiada: Evrographics [a more detailed exploration of the relationship between sustainability literacy and Critical Discourse Analysis]