

Gavan Watson Video Interview: Key Themes

**Gavan Watson, associate director of e-learning,
Western University**

Interviewed March 15, 2016

Curriculum development funding

Gavan describes some examples of the work he does related to ESD, “some obvious and others a bit more ‘hidden,’ in my roles as educational developer when at [the University of] Guelph and now at Western [University]. First, at Guelph, I suggested an opportunity to link sustainability education with the Office of Sustainability. With some funding and an application process, we helped faculty members develop or redevelop course curricula to include, broadly speaking, education for sustainability within the curriculum. We wanted to insure that faculty members were able to have the resources to redesign their courses to include sustainability as defined largely by the folks involved, hence very faculty-driven. Proposals came from across the institution.”

Community of practice in sustainability

Another example from Guelph is the sustainability community of practice. “We brought together faculty members who were interested in themes of sustainability and their curricula. We had faculty from the sciences, business, arts and humanities.” Gavan wore two hats, acting as a facilitator of the process and also as a participant with a scholarly interest in the topic. “As Guelph had released a white paper on sustainability, one of our first meetings was to review it within the lens of teaching and learning ... [and] then see what kind of action we could take. Another action that faculty were interested in taking was turning to the literature to get a better idea of what kinds of practices were being done elsewhere, and incorporating those as applicable to their particular teaching and learning situation.”

Learning outcomes and the role of the educational developer

At Western, Gavan is focussed more explicitly on technology-enhanced learning and support for curricular practices. “This is the more hidden part of education for sustainability. At the curricular level, faculty are discussing program-level learning outcomes. There is often an opportunity to highlight themes that they might or might not have thought of, and I’ll often include sustainability as one of those themes. As educational developers, I think we don’t have true neutrality. It’s not my curriculum, but I can offer ideas for departments to consider.

“We have been going through the development of ‘Western Degree Outcomes’ or institutional-level learning outcomes. Sustainability doesn’t explicitly appear in there, but it’s interesting to look at what would be involved with taking sustainable actions in the future, things like critical thinking, awareness of multiple perspectives, and ability to take different perspectives. And I hope that going forward, part of my role would be to help make connections amongst the Western Degree Outcomes and the outcomes that a department might be interested in foregrounding.”

Interdisciplinarity is key

“Sustainability is a complex challenge; there is not explicitly one right answer. There is a host of human factors, environmental and technological factors. And as an educational developer, I’m moving across disciplines, speaking to faculty with different backgrounds and different kinds of training. They have different worldviews when it comes to how knowledge is created, how knowledge is communicated. So the notion of interdisciplinarity is key.”

The civic responsibility of universities

Gavan believes that it’s a question of what universities are about. “There’s a civic responsibility and an opportunity for developing citizens of the world ... They build critically aware students, perhaps who are environmentally literate, but definitely who are engaged in the world around them. I find that

education for sustainability provides a lens that crosses many disciplines and engages students, regardless of whether they graduate as engineers or humanists.”

Gavan sees the students wanting knowledge of the many themes that are broadly related to education for sustainability, such as “the limits of, and meaningful use of, resources; questions of social justice; and relationships that our colonial ancestors and that we currently have with First Nations here in Canada; and the soft skills of communication and collaboration. To grapple with the large issues of society ... will require a graduate of an institution like a university to be able to leverage those kinds of skills in order to make meaningful change.”

Gavan notes that sustainability in higher education is often seen as a physical plant problem. “Granted, waste leaves campus and energy comes from somewhere, but I think that’s a bit of a shallow approach. No doubt it’s important to demonstrate that institutions like universities can engage and improve the sustainability of their physical plant, but coming as an educator and educational developer, I

see educational development for sustainability beginning and ending as a curricular issue.”

When educational development and disciplinary training overlap

“Like my work as an educational developer, my work related to education for sustainability is deeply aligned with my own personal values ... My disciplinary training is in Environmental Studies and Environmental Education, and my current scholarly work is educational development. When those two areas overlap and I can engage meaningfully in both, it’s incredibly rewarding.”

These excerpts are from one of 10 video interviews done for “Cases of Education for Sustainability in Educational Development,” a project undertaken by a team from Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and George Brown College to capture principles and practices used by educational developers from across Canada to support education for sustainable development (ESD).