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Campfire Sessions as Contemplative Intervention to Facilitate the Redesign of Education for Regenerative Systems Change

Aniek Draaisma and Bas van den Berg

The world today is facing sustainability challenges that will ultimately lead humanity into a state of deep crisis. This state of the world requires an educational transformation in today's context. There is no shortage of possible alternative educational practices to meet the needs of a society in transition. However, there is a lack of knowledge and skills on how to implement these practices in the educational system in a sustainable way, with plenty of internal and external resistance. The field of education is experiencing a lack of capacity and willingness to respond to the demands of our time by successfully initiating forms of systemic change. This initial study helps us to explore contemplative campfire sessions as a vehicle for educational change, facilitating slowness, dialogue and space for a solidly built new structure. To this end, we explored metaphorical campfires as sites for micro-phenomenological interventions inspired by the principles of regenerative education. These sessions were co-created with Built Environment teachers who are in the process of redesigning their curriculum for the transition challenges facing cities (e.g. increasing numbers of people living in cities, energy transition, smart integration of water, issues of mobility). It is too early to claim that contemplative bonfires are the ingenious solution to our transition problems, but our exploration has shown promising results in prioritising, designing and implementing educational change issues.

KEYWORDS: regenerative education, systemic educational change, climate crisis, built environment, campfire of change.

RSD TOPICS: Learning & Education

Introduction

The world today is facing sustainability challenges that will ultimately lead humanity into a state of deep crisis. According to the latest report of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it is no longer possible to avoid the effects of climate change, as we are heading towards an increase of 1.5°C by 2030 or, most likely, sooner (IPCC, 2023). Humanity is overstepping the social and ecological foundations that allow for a healthy planetary existence (Guzman, 2021; Raworth, 2017). This poses a serious long-term threat to the stability of eco-social systems, with potentially catastrophic consequences for Earth's ability to sustain life (IPCC, 2022).

As the world as we know it is in transition, there is a need for educational change in today's context. Humans need to move towards a more sustainability-oriented future where eco-social systems balance human activities with the integrity of natural ecosystems (Raworth, 2017; Wahl, 2016) and stay within safe and just Earth system limits (Rockström et al., 2023). It has been argued that higher education can play an important role in these complex transition processes by enabling students and other stakeholders to co-create these sustainable futures (Biesta, 2021; Poldner, 2020; Wals, 2019; Barnett, 2017).

Higher education is linked to all factors that have a potential impact on sustainability transitions, such as the built environment in academic universities and colleges. Demographic projections indicate that by the end of this century, 70% of the world's population will live in cities. This raises critical issues for the redesign of urban environments to be in balance with the carrying capacity of the natural world while providing socially just and equitable living. Currently, most cities are exceeding planetary boundaries, leading to the rise of regenerative design for urban systems (Andersen et al., 2019; Hobbie & Grimm, 2020; Ryan, 2013). This design perspective aims to rebalance and heal human-nature relationships. However, this has implications for

the education of future built environment professionals to include more regenerative forms of education and design. The Built Environment cluster at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) is working on redesigning its curriculum to meet these challenges. However, this raises challenges about what education is or should be about that may be beyond the scope of teachers to address alone.

The literature has long proposed (higher) educational responses to achieve a more sustainable future. There is no shortage of possible alternative educational practices to meet the needs of societies in transition. However, the translation of theory into practice has been limited. As a result, there is a lack of knowledge and skills on how to implement these practices in the education system in a sustainable way and a lot of internal and external resistance. This practice-action gap severely undermines the capacity and potential of higher education to transform the degenerative human impact on the planet into a regenerative one. The gap makes more radical regenerative forms of higher education difficult to realise. The greatest difficulty to overcome may be within educators themselves, as it takes considerable courage to engage with design principles (Van den Berg, 2023).

Previous work in systemic design has highlighted the importance of emphatically slowing down for systemic change (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcom, 2020; Ceschin & Gaziulusoy, 2016). We suggest that a slow perspective on systemic (design of) educational change may, ironically, be the most empathetic and quickest way to achieve systemic change for a more transformative and regenerative higher education. The slow movement in academic and applied higher education argues for slowness in teaching practices. Firstly, to address the stresses and pressures embedded in the 'consumer model' of higher education, and secondly, to make teaching and learning more effective and relevant to the demands of society (Berg & Seeber, 2013). Or, as Mountz et al. (2015) describe the movement's plea: It explores and advocates "(...) ways of slowing down and claiming time for slow scholarship and collective action. (...) Above all, we argue for the slow scholarship movement and contribute some strategies of resistance that foreground collaborative, collective, and communal ways forward." (pp. 1236-1237). The authors argue that slowness is not only about time but also about existing structures of power and inequality in universities. Slowness in education provides time and space to work with care for ourselves and others, and we add: with care for the world.

This initial study helps us to explore contemplative campfire sessions as a vehicle for educational change, as it allows for slowness, dialogue and space for a solidly built new structure. We identify this method as a way of working towards systemic design, aligning with Wahl's (2016) perspective of design as 'any intentional intervention to change systemic trajectories'. We explore the appropriateness of a micro-phenomenological approach to facilitate the redesign of higher education towards more regenerative possibilities. We present key tensions and challenges that emerged and reflect on the form and potential richness of contemplative campfire sessions to play a role in (educational) systemic change.

Methods

From January to April 2023, we explored metaphorical bonfires as sites for micro-phenomenological interventions inspired by the principles of regenerative education. These sessions were co-created with volunteer Built Environment (Civil Engineering, Spatial Engineering and Architecture) teachers from THUAS, who are in the process of redesigning their curriculum for the transition challenges facing cities (e.g. increasing numbers of people living in cities, energy transition, smart integration of water, issues of mobility). The invitation to participate in this pilot followed a workshop at a Built Environment Teachers' Team Day, where discussions about the worldviews and philosophical underpinnings of the teachers as individuals and as a team came to the fore. The intervention was designed to help senior members of the team to make these implicit elements more explicit.

Initially, three teachers participated in three sessions. The first session was a one-to-one session with each teacher and the first author. In the first session, we explored what education is about and what it ideally looks like. One of the teachers stopped participating after the first session; it is unclear whether this was resistance to the way of working or pressure from educational practice, as the teacher did not respond to requests to evaluate the process. Two teachers and the first author attended the other two sessions. In the second session, we explored the extent to which current built environment education meets the essence and ideal learning situation of the teachers. During the third session, we discussed how the essence of education and the ideal learning situations can be emphasised in Built Environment teaching practices. We

called them campfire sessions because we facilitated a quiet setting, we were able to speak freely—without a strict topic list or agenda—and philosophising was encouraged. The conversations during the sessions were recorded, transcribed and analysed through qualitative analysis, maintaining a micro-phenomenological perspective.

Micro-phenomenology is a qualitative research tool that allows the exploration of subjective experiences by focusing on personally important details in lived or imagined experiences and explores the emergence of ideas (Heimann et al., 2022; Petitmangin, 2018ab). Micro-phenomenology was chosen for this study because it allows for deeper engagement with the systemic elements under the iceberg in complex settings such as education system change (Smeenk, 2022). We applied micro-phenomenology during the campfire sessions with the THUAS teachers by focusing extensively on their ideal learning environment and presenting the key themes by illustrating them through actual quoted parts of conversations that read as a short dialogue.

Key Themes

In this section, we share the key themes that emerged from this campfire engagement. We do this by highlighting composite snippets of actual dialogue on the themes most discussed by the teachers. The aim is not to find synergy but to highlight the diversity of the actual conversations and the reflections on them. By sharing the actual dialogues that took place, we invite the reader to engage with the emergence of the results through the narrative forms in which they occurred. The theme of the dialogue across the sessions was co-created with the participating teachers during and after each session. In practice, this meant that the agenda for the next conversation was set based on what the teachers felt was most pressing.

The key themes described are a composite vignette of the conversations that took place. It is important to note that these composites were constructed by the researchers on the basis of the actual dialogues and trialogues. For reasons of word count, the three most discussed themes are presented in the results.

Theme 1: Tension between safety and risk

Teacher 1:

I think what's important [in learning environments] is a certain amount of risk. If you do it wrong, it will have real consequences. If you learn to swim, you could dive on a rock; that hurts. So there is a certain danger in it.

Teacher 2:

If I listen to you, it is mainly that the danger must really be present. You can't put six twigs together and then hope you can add another floor on top.

Teacher 1:

Exactly, while you can put six twigs against each other here [at the university] and then you get a pass. Because: yes, yes, we didn't describe that you couldn't, so yes, we can't give it an F(ail). But put six twigs against each other, and then you go to sleep in them for a night, then everyone says: yes, wait a minute, then I will continue to build on it. Then there is a risk; then you will do your best.

Researcher:

And what does this establish with the students?

Teacher 1:

More attention, more involvement. It's more interesting because there's a certain amount of risk in it, but if you do it and there's a danger involved, then you'll naturally get more attention. I recently saw a student with a shirt that read: you win some, you learn some. I think if you are only successful, you are not learning. You learn best from things that don't work. Maybe it's just efficiency. I just want you to pay close attention, so I'm going to increase the risk. Training wheels off. No bullshit. And that also makes it fun because students make a big learning leap. You thought it was hard, and it was. But very soon you can do something. And it doesn't make you arrogant. Rather modest.

Teacher 2:

But isn't it also inherent in student projects that they can always screw up?

Teacher 1:

Maybe so, and at the same time, it's our responsibility to keep them safe. We don't choose the place where the most currents are, or the most rocks.

What appealed to me in your image is that it is a very natural setting. It's not like no, it's really water, it's really wet, it's really deep.

Teacher 2:

Compared to how things are going now, the university environment and the real world, however, are far apart. That makes me a bit disappointed in education. I do understand that it is difficult to do otherwise, but I do not find all the restrictions in hours an enrichment. I would like more time for individual students. The system that children in secondary school are learning in boxes and subjects, and they are all separate pillars so I don't have the feeling that they understand the world as a whole. I really think that's a loss. I want to go back to an integral assignment and go into practice. All those partitions kill curiosity.

What is the essence in your image?

Teacher 1:

The essence is agreement, I think. Agreement, trust, the learners agree to a situation that is not safe. Because that is ultimately the way to learn. And that means trusting the teachers as well. It is up to the teachers not to damage that trust.

Theme 2: Safe learning communities to facilitate curiosity and braveness

Teacher 2:

I see small groups that sit together curiously and respectfully and observe a lot as a form of learning. Intimate learning communities: that is central. Not so much that it is closed, but that you form the learning community with a smaller club. The university is huge. That may be smaller and more balanced. Why, for example, are there no children around here? Safety and inclusion, a small community in which everyone is seen and fits into the whole. Everyone has their place. I think it is important that the learning community feels safe and that everyone is seen, that there is peace and openness; then it is important, I think, to build that

up first in the small community before you can go outside and listen to others. Because I think it's difficult to listen if you don't even know where your base is yet.

Teacher 3:

If you want enthusiasm, an important condition is small groups. That condition is currently met in my teaching practice.

Teacher 2:

That intimate learning community is very important to me, too. But I see a kind of complexity emerging there in practice. That you try to realise something as a learning community, while other learning communities communicate: you must also think of us.

I think a lot of energy and thinking capacity leaks out when you don't feel safe.

If a lion comes after you, you're not going to do some more maths. That is a prerequisite for a good understanding. And for me, learning is understanding.

Theme 3: Space for contemplation and campfires

Teacher 2:

I like campfires. And the great thing about fire is that it moves, and it's something that you can turn your mind away from. So you look at the fire, you are drawn to the heat. You don't sit with your back to a fire. Fire attracts your attention, which gives your mind some space because there is simply not much more to experience than a beautiful spectacle. And your head has the space to let your thoughts go, so to speak. So that's why I think that a campfire also creates very nice conversations. Deeper conversations than general conversations.

Teacher 1:

If you're surviving all the time [in an educational context], no one has time to think.

And to conclude that a year ago we stood in the same place. I was thinking about those ancient Greeks. How did they do that then? I would also wish for that Greek agora where people with experience exchange their experience and thus develop knowledge and become better together.

Teacher 2:

What kind of setting would be an ideal setting for you? With students?

Teacher 1:

Yeah, I think that shouldn't matter. But in a natural way there is a difference in experience. If you have ten years of experience, you will have a different conversation than if you are a student and you have not yet done an internship. And you would like to include both in the agora.

How do I see that? Not a classroom. The physical environment helps you to come to such a conversation. You put a bench somewhere, you can sit down. That in itself is not the problem, we already have all kinds of places where you can do that.

Teacher 2:

But if all goes well, it happens on such a bench? The agora?

Teacher 1:

Yes sometimes. But it's more of a time issue, I think, than a place issue. Don't have time or don't make time. I think this is a deeply cherished wish.

Researcher:

Within the university?

Teacher 1:

Or at least within me.

Researcher:

So, a proverbial campfire as an opportunity for teachers and other professionals to philosophise and exchange with each other about the form and content of education. And students are also welcome there?

Teacher 3:

I would like to have group discussions with students for two hours. You can teach something by telling and explaining your choice. My favourite work method is: sitting on the table, marker in my hand, plates behind me. Let them talk at the same time; I think that's the best. I think they gain more from that: made practical, think about it themselves, in the lesson itself. But someone else might benefit more from getting everything explained reading a book. It also depends on what you want to teach them. And it differs per student.

Reflections

On the discussed themes

Pressing themes

In the first session, we imagined how university education could be imagined in a new world where humanity would (re)create it. This led to elements of real risk, real-life learning, safe learning communities and space for contemplative sessions and open dialogue with students. This, according to the teachers, is sometimes at odds with current higher education.

Conflicting teacher ideals

There were also interesting conflicts in the teachers' ideas about, for example, the places and forms of co-creation in education. Two teachers felt that there was a need for more reflection and open dialogue with other teachers and pupils about the form and content of educational practice, while the other teacher felt that this space for open dialogue with pupils was present and fulfilling in his own teaching practice.

Gap between ideal world and real world

The gap between real-life learning and learning at university is considered too wide by two out of three teachers. If students' learning experiences involve a certain 'danger', if there is more to lose than a good grade, it stimulates their involvement, attention and curiosity. However, there is a fine line between a risky and an unsafe learning environment. Creating an intimate and protected learning community before entering the real world with real dangers helps students to be open and receptive to new information and insights. It is, therefore, essential that students are made aware of the risks they may experience when learning in the 'real world' and that they agree to a set of conditions to feel comfortable with that risk.

On the campfire sessions

Overall reflections

The sessions were found to be insightful, helpful and even enjoyable by two of the three teachers and the researcher (first author). The second author also contacted the first author and the teachers separately and echoed these experiences. Time and space to

philosophise about education and its purpose in the process of redesigning the curriculum was mentioned by these teachers as an elusive wish, and the researcher providing this space and taking the lead during the sessions was a welcome opportunity to actually make this time in their calendars. However, the third teacher dropped out after the first session; we intend to evaluate this with the teacher to understand her motives and take this into account in future bonfire sessions.

Finding space for contemplation

Contemplation without a clear and structured agenda was not always easy for the teachers. The circumstances of meeting late on a long day, not knowing exactly what to do and where to start, led to the realisation that future sessions might need a way of landing or grounding in a place where one could distance oneself from the stressed reality and engage in meaningful dialogue and reflection. However, it is difficult to identify moments when the researcher and the teacher come together in the first place. There seems to be (too) little time in the schedules of educational professionals to engage in the kind of contemplative dialogue that delves between what is on the surface and what flows underneath. In other words, to sit by the fire. Creating a sense of urgency and time may, therefore, be essential for prioritising contemplative practices with teachers in higher education. However, partly because the outcomes of this kind of intervention are not (immediately) tangible, it is possible that the perceived value of making time for contemplation will fall down the list of priorities in daily practice. At least in the Netherlands, where a lack of teacher professionalisation is a major and well-established barrier to change in higher education, this may imply a great responsibility for educational leaders to facilitate the kind of structures and spaces for contemplative dialogue (Wagenaar, 2023).

From dialogue to practical change

The step from philosophical dialogue to practical implications was perceived as challenging by the researcher. However, the teachers emphasised that they found the exercise in itself enriching for their pedagogical professionalism. Two of the teachers also acknowledged the power of having a (guided) moment to (re)reflect on their educational philosophical concepts. Or spaces in which they could rethink and challenge their own educational concepts under the iceberg of the system. They described this as

similar to a campfire, where people could engage in a deeper dialogue than they normally experience in their daily practice.

Action confidence

It is arguable that the two points above, the immaterialisation of the outcomes of the campfire sessions and the step from contemplation to actual (change in) action, are linked by what Pomeroy and Oliver (2020) describe as action confidence. In their study of the impact of a transformative learning course on daily life and work, they conclude that in order to feel confident enough to move into experimental action, we need to access and integrate different forms of learning. "In particular, in a world where conceptual knowledge is privileged, the learning process brings into awareness and validates emotional/relational and spiritual/intuitive knowledge. Creating coherence between these different forms of knowledge enables people to act from knowledge that is connected to their deeper experience". (p. 83). The authors integrate Scharmer's (2018) argument into their study that in order to address the great challenges of our time, we need to see learning from emerging future possibilities as an important source of these different forms of learning. Through the campfire sessions with the Built Environment teachers, we took a first step towards integrating different forms of learning that are more relational, spiritual and intuitive than conceptual learning by exploring what education might look like in the future. In order to build confidence to act with teachers (and researchers), we need to explore further how to connect these forms of learning.

Involving students

Finally, it is important to note that only teachers were involved in this pilot study. It could be interesting to explore the power of this type of intervention in communities of teachers and students, particularly during training courses. This was recognised by the teachers, as holding space with students and colleagues for open dialogues about Built Environment education was identified as the third theme.

Conclusions

In this paper, we described why and how we co-created contemplative campfire moments for and with teachers to explore the tensions and challenges that arise from required developments in curricula and learning environments for Built Environment education at THUAS.

It is too early to state that micro-phenomenological contemplative campfires are a possible method to engage with systemic design (within education). However, the positive experience of the researchers and teachers involved in this study indicates a potential that it may be an interesting intervention to pursue further.

The outcomes of the study are hard to grasp, as they roughly fall in the domain of Socratic dialogue or philosophical development of teachers. The researchers experience the perceived lack of practical implications of these sessions as something challenging to navigate.

Furthermore, there is a tension between moving from the metaphorical language of philosophy towards practical implementation for educational practice. The conversations were experienced as imaginative and beautiful. However, the translation to the Built Environment educational context remained elusive. It is possible that metaphors are easy to use for these types of dialogue because of the complex nature of learning that may be more easily grasped through metaphor. One of the (dis)advantages of metaphor, however, is that they are void of the practicalities of educational practice.

Further investigating how action confidence is to be established after letting go of what is known and contemplating on what is desirable is an important next step for the researchers and the teachers. However, it is worth questioning if the experience itself—of having these philosophical engagements—may already be valuable in its own right without leading to direct (systemic) change. Or indeed, if facilitating these conversations is what may lead to the realisation of systemic (re)design. With future research, we could further explore ways to indicate the value of creating the time to engage with collective contemplative practice. It could be the case that creating more of these campfire sessions within educational systems where the time and space are created to

engage with what is beneath individual and collective icebergs of education may be powerful interventions designers can do to change (higher) education eventually.

Ten Takeaways

This paper discusses the challenges of achieving sustainability in the face of climate change and the need for educational change to respond to these challenges. Key points from the text include:

1. **Sustainability challenges**: The world faces sustainability challenges, including climate change, that pose a long-term threat to the planet's ability to sustain life. These challenges require significant changes in education and society.
2. **The role of higher education**: Higher education, including fields such as the built environment, has a critical role to play in addressing sustainability transitions by preparing students to create a more sustainable future.
3. **Gap in Implementation**: While there are many proposed alternative educational practices to address sustainability, there is a significant gap in knowledge and skills on how to effectively implement these practices in a sustainable manner, and there are various resistances to change.
4. **Slowness and systemic change**: We introduce the concept of 'slowness' as a way of achieving systemic change in education. Slowness is described as a means of creating time and space for meaningful reflection and dialogue that can lead to more effective systemic change in education.
5. **Campfire sessions**: The text explores the idea of "contemplative campfire sessions" as a vehicle for educational change. These sessions provide a platform for educators to engage in slow, meaningful dialogue and reflection about the future of education and its role in sustainability.
6. **Key Themes**: The text highlights several key themes that emerged from the campfire sessions, including the tension between safety and risk in learning, the importance of safe learning communities that facilitate curiosity and courage, and the value of contemplation and dialogue for educational professionals.

7. ****Action Confidence****: The text suggests that action confidence, or the ability to move from contemplation to practical change, is a major challenge in educational transformation. Integrating different forms of learning, including emotional and intuitive knowing, is seen as essential to achieving action confidence.
8. ****Involving students****: While the study focused on teachers, there is recognition of the potential benefits of involving students in similar contemplative practices and open dialogues about educational issues.
9. ****Challenges of Implementation****: We acknowledge the challenges of translating philosophical discussions into practical changes in educational practices and curricula.
10. ****The value of philosophical engagement****: We question whether the act of engaging in philosophical dialogue has value in itself, even if it does not immediately lead to practical action.

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