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LIGHTS - Sustainability

Sustainability teaching to transform, not conform: a reflective guide for change

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[Sustainability teaching to transform, not conform: a reflective guide for change

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Abstract

Business schools must rethink their role in addressing global sustainability challenges. This text offers a reflective guide—Head, Heart, Hands, and Place—to support transformative pedagogy and shares grounded practices we used to reorient our teaching and learning. We call on educators and higher education leaders to reimagine business education as a plural, critical, and context-sensitive practice.

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Sustainability teaching to transform, not conform: a reflective guide for change

Why we need to rethink business education

Business schools today sit at the crossroads of influence and responsibility. As institutions that shape many of the next generation of business leaders and workers, they wield considerable power in determining how business engages with the world's most pressing challenges. Despite this opportunity, for decades, they have been criticized for perpetuating economic models that valorize short-term profits over long-term sustainability, individualism over community, and control over care. The ecological crisis, rising inequalities, and systemic social injustices cannot be offered as topics for electives; they are central to the future of our societies and call for radical changes in business school education.

However, sustainability is often conceived of as narrowly as possible and still addressed superficially within business schools: inserted into core strategy courses as a checklist item or relegated to a specialized, niche program. Efforts remain fragmented, constrained by outdated regressive rankings, a pervasive culture of technocratic neutrality and technology optimism, and accreditation pressures. Moreover, the current geopolitical climate—including the rollback of environmental and DEI commitments in the U.S. and beyond—signals an ideological and ecological backlash that may further weaken the role of international accreditations in advancing sustainability, as illustrated by AACSB's recent relaxing of its DEI standard¹.

Against this backdrop, we must ask not only “what” we teach but “why” and “how”. We must move beyond sustainability as a management problem “to be solved” and treat it as an invitation to reimagine our relationship with the world, the natural ecosystems and each other. This paper offers both a call to action and a practical guide to engage in a self-reflective process (Allen et al. 2019) for reorienting European business education from the inside out.

Assumptions that hold us back

Many of the most powerful barriers to transformation in business education are invisible, structurally and ideologically. They are embedded in our tacit assumptions: that nature is a resource to be optimized; that success is measured by efficiency and growth; that rationality is the highest form of intelligence. These assumptions are legacies of Western modernity, and they deeply shape our teaching (Colombo et al. 2024).

The instrumental rationality of modern capitalism, as Castoriadis (1997) or Descola (2005) explain, has long positioned humans as separate from, and above, nature. This separation legitimizes domination—of natural ecosystems, of non-Western knowledge systems, and of emotional expression. Business schools have absorbed this logic, often framing sustainability as an external risk to be managed or a market to be captured, rather than a paradigm shift to be reckoned with.

At the same time, colonial and racial hierarchies persist, not only in institutional structures but in epistemologies. What counts as legitimate knowledge? Whose voices are heard in

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/55517f63-c3a4-408d-84f1-cb6d670aa7ed>

our classrooms? A critical step in transforming business education is making these assumptions visible and opening space for other (radical) ways of knowing and being.

A practical framework: Head, Heart, Hands... and Place

Transformation cannot begin without self-reflection and introspection. Drawing on the work of Orr (1992), Sipos et al. (2008), and Renouard et al. (2020), we propose a four-dimensional reflective guide for educators informed by: Head, Heart, Hands, and Place. By integrating cognitive understanding (head), emotional engagement (heart), and practical action (hands), Orr's (1992) original model aligns closely with the multidimensional nature of sustainability challenges. It moves beyond knowledge transmission to cultivate critical thinking, empathy, and agency—skills essential for navigating complex socio-ecological systems. We have added the Place dimension to highlight the importance of contextual specificity—recognizing that sustainability education must be grounded in local realities, histories, and power dynamics to be truly transformative.

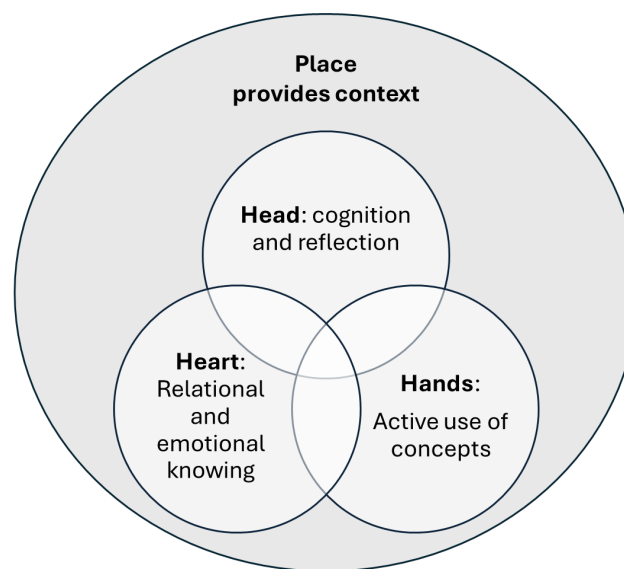


Figure 1. Head, heart, and hands pedagogical model
(adapted from Orr, 1992 & Spinos et al., 2008), adding the place dimension.

- **Head:** This refers to cognition—our understanding of ecological concepts, systemic challenges, and the role of business in a changing world. Educators can interrogate the sources and limitations of their knowledge: What do we teach as 'fact'? What do we leave out? How does our disciplinary training constrain or expand our imagination?
- **Heart:** Emotional engagement is often excluded from management education, although it is vital. The topic of sustainability elicits fear, grief, guilt, and hope. These emotions can help students and educators connect more deeply with the urgency and meaning of their work. How do we create space for emotional expression without losing academic rigor?
- **Hands:** This is about practice—what we do in the classroom and how we embed practice in our curriculum. It includes pedagogy, case selection, guest speakers, and authentic assessment methods. Are we reproducing business-as-usual through our teaching methods, or doing things differently?
- **Place:** Often overlooked, place refers to context—geographic, institutional, cultural. Sustainability issues differ by region, as do institutional constraints. Recognizing the importance of place helps situate abstract concepts in lived realities. It also challenges the one-size-fits-all model of global business education. This is particularly relevant in questioning the role of business education in driving sustainability, due to the increasing

internationalization of higher education. Our students come from very different regions of the world and do not share common assumptions or the same physical context. Do we acknowledge such heterogeneity in class? Do we build on these diverse roots and worldviews?

By encouraging “surface–interrogate–transform questions” across each of these dimensions, this guide becomes a tool for reflexive learning, individually and collectively.

Applying the guide: insights from practice

We applied this guide in our own institutions—three European business schools—through curriculum redesign, team workshops, and student engagement. These practices produced both friction and momentum. Some highlights include:

- Introducing role-playing exercises where students adopt perspectives not only as managers but as farmers, future citizens, or non-human species.
- Creating safe classroom spaces for discussing eco-anxiety, climate grief, and resistance.
- Revising core modules on supply chain management to include sourcing communities from the Global South, planetary boundaries, and degrowth perspectives.
- Running 'design fiction' classes in which students create artifacts from imagined sustainable futures.
- Replacing traditional business cases with narratives of grassroots innovation, feminist economies, and post-growth enterprises.

Importantly, these actions did not rely on major institutional reforms. They were led by motivated educators gradually but deliberately shifting what and how they taught. What emerged was not a blueprint, but a set of possibilities to shape, develop and sustain. This allows us to believe that business education can be otherwise.

Conclusion: reflections for educators and deans

With our article, we talk to educators: “You do not need permission to begin. Reflective practice is powerful. Start with one course, one module, one conversation. Invite students to imagine and craft different futures from the business-as-usual templates. Integrate artistic, emotional, and systemic methods. Connect with allies across departments and disciplines. And remember: sustainability is not just content—it is orientation, it is a compass.”

Although our guide begins with individual reflection, its true potential lies in collective engagement and institutional commitment; we don't want to overlook political and structural efforts. Systemic transformation in business education cannot rely on isolated initiatives—it must be supported by institutional shifts in policy, governance, and culture. Educators' individual agency matters and we call for mobilization, but it can only gain momentum through shared purpose, strategic guidelines and coordinated action.

Consequently, we also engage with deans and academic decision makers: “Change requires courage and support. Rethink incentives that prioritize citations over impact, or rankings over relevance. Support faculty experimenting with new forms of pedagogy. Protect critical voices. Fund interdisciplinary initiatives. Embed sustainability in strategic plans not as a market signal or as an add-on, but as a value.”

The transformation of business education is already underway. But urgency demands more than incrementalism. We must engage in a deeply transformative process, from siloed to systemic, from knowing to becoming. Reimagining business education in Europe calls for a deep engagement with plural worldviews and value systems. By embracing multiple ways of knowing and situating learning within diverse contexts, educators and education leaders can foster critical reflection and meaningful responsiveness. This shift moves us beyond technocratic fixes toward a more ethical, political, and inclusive approach to sustainability. Yet, current trends reveal a waning interest in sustainability education, overshadowed by the accelerating excitement around AI; we call for a renewed and strengthened commitment to critically re-examining our assumptions and approaches to both sustainability and AI education

This paper is not a conclusion but an opening. We invite business educators and leaders to engage with this guide as a continuous process. A process of reimagining, together, what business education is—and what it could become.

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