Pedagogisk reflektion

Critical Thinking and Case Method – A Short Reflection on Teaching Sustainability

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Introduction

As educators, we are tasked with not only imparting knowledge but also fostering the skills that will enable students to navigate and address future challenges. Critical thinking, particularly in the context of social sustainability, is essential for developing solutions to pressing global issues.

Drawing on my experience in teaching Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) courses at the Faculty of Business, Kristianstad University, I will discuss how educational strategies like case studies in the form of role plays can enhance students' ability to engage with sustainability issues. CSR's broad focus on sustainability provides the flexibility to explore a wide range of topics, from human rights issues to profitable business models, making it an ideal setting for experimenting with and reflecting on different pedagogical approaches. Specifically, I will illustrate how role plays, and case studies can be designed to challenge students' perspectives and promote deeper understanding. These methods not only help students grasp complex sustainability issues but also support their development into thoughtful and informed leaders.

Critical thinking and social sustainability

I am making several assumptions in this reflection: If we are talking about societal issues and social sustainability, that means the social order we live in is not desirable, that it is in danger, and that it is possible to influence through our actions. Thus, I also assume, that to be able

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to come to these conclusions and to be able to chart a path towards change, we need to be able to identify the problems and offer possible solutions to these problems and even foresee some potential problems arising from our solutions. Also, I assume that if we follow the same patterns of thinking that lead to the (potentially) undesirable situation today, we will be repeating the same mistakes. To break the cycle, we need to adopt a critical perspective, examining all the small interactions and factors that lead to the present situation, rather than accepting issues at face value.

In many course syllabi, there is an intended learning outcome connected to critical thinking. We use words such as reflective, critical reflection, critical thinking, critical analysis, critical evaluation among others to denote some sense of having a critical perspective on the issues. However, I do not thing that critical thinking is a ”thing,” an outcome, that we can easily measure. On the contrary, it is, a process that should lead individuals to identifying and investigating the taken for granted assumptions they operate under (Brookefield 2012; Facione, 2011).

How we teach the students critical thinking is not always clear (and perhaps it should not be either), as having one-size fits all strategies do not work that well (Facione, 2011; Rear, 2018). Furthermore, what ”critical” means is not something that can be easily communicated either. As Brookfield (2012) has put it, the aim of critical thinking is for students to ”recognize, and question, the assumptions that determine how knowledge in that discipline is recognized as legitimate” (p. 28). For me, in one course it is about seeing power structures that are hidden and how they operate, in another course it is about experimenting with new technologies to provide services. These fall within different critical traditions (see e.g. Brookfield, 2012) and how they are operationalized is not something I can put into a course syllabus.

Challenges and strategies in teaching sustainability

I will argue that when it comes to sustainability, be it social sustainability or sustainability in general, we might need to also be aware that sustainability is a result of critical thinking per se. Was it not this critical

thinking that argued that a focus on just economic aspects is harmful as it does not cover important issues of life? Throughout recent history the argument for only caring about the profit has changed to the embracement of the ”triple bottom line,” and to concepts like ”shared value”, in an attempt to present this old critique as a win-win situation. This shift raises an important question: if students merely accept these new sustainability concepts without questioning them, are they truly engaging in critical thinking? If they ”just accept” can they ”resist the temptations to exclude a wide range of ideas in favour of a sustainability or sustainable development agenda?” (Wals & Jickling, 2002).

When we teach sustainability, what is it that we ask for when we say critical thinking? Sustainability, in various forms have been integrated in business and management education for some time (Figueriro & Raufflet, 2015), so what is it that we ask our students to do? Is it for the students to confirm that all aspects matter? Common knowledge! Is it for them to say, ”it depends” and give some examples? A similar answer is often found in the next chapter of the assigned course material! If the next chapter in the book writes about how triple bottom line can be used, and if the issue is common sense, what is the point of asking that in a classroom? This is just an empty performance that we provide, and students provide their empty performance back. If transformative learning that transforms ”our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive” (Mezirow, 2000, cited in Sterling, 2010) is necessary for sustainability (Sterling, 2010), can we achieve it by these performances?

Games and role play for sustainability

I make use of games and role plays to add critical thinking to my courses. In this way, I am rather in line with Lannefors et al. (2020) who have claimed that cases can work if they are created or adjusted to work with sustainability and critical thinking. In cases, we have a premise of a problem that the students must work through in a rather brief time frame without becoming too involved with the other reading material. Cases are useful as they allow students to practice problem-solving and decision-making while at the same time arguing for their position. Case-based learning has its problems. It is often touted as being

uncritical and action oriented, leading to the creation of leaders that have a functionalist understanding that neglect other stakeholders' interests and are stuck with predetermined answers (Mintzberg, 2004; Bridgman et al., 2016). This critic is underscored by historical examples. As Collinson and Tourish (2015) have pointed out, cases that once enshrined ENRON as a successful organization disappeared after the ENRON scandal. The scandal exposed the flaws in the previously praised aspects of ENRON's leadership and resource use, revealing the limitations and potential biases of case-based learning.

Using the terminology of Thomas (2009), I see cases as a possibility to "build-in" sustainability into the courses, ensuring that the education is for sustainability rather than having a "bolt-on" approach, where education is about sustainability. I have also used cases from course books and well-known case providers in various courses. They are either costly, as we need to pay for every student, are related to concepts covered in the chapter of a book, or are too detailed and heavy for the students to engage with. So, why not try something small and simple?

I use a small case set up as a role play for some of my CSR courses created by Solmaz Filiz Karabag and Mohammed Eslami, two former colleagues from Linköping University. What I like about it is that it is short and loose and that it does not have a real solution. It is about the case of Rana Plaza, which was a disaster that involved the garment industry in Bangladesh. The role play is set up so that students are grouped into 4 to 5 stakeholders, representing the multinational company that outsources production to the local factory, the local factory, the local government, the customers, and the workers involved with the case. After having read the same information beforehand, the students are asked to first come to an agreement within their respective groups: what is the problem and what is their common position. Then taking the role of their stakeholders, they argue for their position against the other stakeholders and start to debate. The end goal is to see if there is a common solution through discussion with all stakeholders so that such a disaster does not happen again.

However, for me the most interesting part is what happens during the debate stage: where the stakeholders must argue their points against

each other, or as I call it, ”shift the blame.” Naturally, to some extent as I ask the students to shift the blame to others, I am in fault of what was criticized before: I am asking the students to take less responsibility by, instead of solving the problem, blame it on others. However, also realistically, we need to prepare the students for what can go wrong, and there is a chance they may find themselves in a situation where someone blames them for something.

It is in this blaming part they need to reflect on their own position and be spontaneous. As their opinions are formed during the role play, they need to be quick to respond to the accusations and adopt strategies to shift the issue to another party, or at least reduce their own responsibility. Furthermore, this session allows students to see how coalitions are built around a common goal and common enemies; it further allows them to experience how coalitions fall as a party may start a coalition with another one. These shifts in coalitions and positions are where I see that critical thinking starts to occur. Sustainability holds a clear meaning in specific contexts, but as a general aim, it is questionable due to conflicting claims among proponents of different value system (Wals & Jickling, 2002). While shifting the blame, the students realise that what they argued to create sustainable solutions from their own stakeholder’s perspective are contested by other stakeholders to *also* create sustainable solutions from their own perspectives. Furthermore, what the students has argued as sustainable solution from their stakeholder’s perspective, they need to disown when they enter into a coalition and create a common position that can satisfy the coalitions common perspective. It is in this stage that the students realise sustainability is hard to achieve.

I take a passive role, sometimes interjecting to keep momentum and ensure everybody can make themselves heard. Thus, I let the students drive the role play and argue for their positions. As the students advocate their positions, where value systems clash, the role play creates a situation similar to ”disorienting dilemmas” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 71), where faced with unexpected situations the students must think differently about something they had previously taken for granted. Doing this they need to offer solutions that they did not think about before, solutions that might even be unethical and may make them feel queasy

about what they are suggesting as they attempt to counter the blame placed on them. This is an important stage, as Komasinski and Ishimura (2017) have argued, we need to face others' perspectives if we want to develop the ability to navigate differences and find solutions for sustainability problems.

Some of us are familiar with design science and design related concepts. While writing this reflection on how to improve teaching of and for sustainability, there is something to consider from that part of literature. Without realizing, teachers may have used what we might called "frictionless" design artifacts (Williams et al., 2020). We prefer to create learning environments where the friction is minimized. However, if we are talking about critical thinking, should we not stop and reflect, and question what is studied? Should we not embrace the frictions that may trigger these reflective moments? Should we not "perhaps occasionally strive towards designs that generate tensions, challenge and frustrate students and lecturers and prompt them to think differently about their own learning practices and education?" (Ryberg et al., 2020, p. 283).

There are disorienting dilemmas that break the flow of good ethical behaviour as the role play goes on: The game is set up, if the blame lands on us, we will pay the bill. So, to not end up with the blame, students might argue for positions that are harming other stakeholders. To create a good common solution at the end we need to sacrifice some benefits. But whose benefit will be sacrificed? Will they accept the sacrifice? Who are we willing to leave worse off? Realisation of the existing of these dilemmas then becomes a learning point for the participating students. Furthermore, if we fight to shift the blame during the debate, how can we later trust the others to create a common solution? This set up necessitates the students to be attentive to the discussion and question the feasibility of their own solutions as well as others. Every year, when I try to mediate the final discussion to create solutions, the students realise that the common-sense exclamations of "more training," "more resources" are not applicable and needs to be nuanced to be able to work in real situations. Just a few minutes ago, they themselves rejected these solutions when faced with opposition, now they need to re-think how these general solutions can be made concrete, they need to come up

with more than the basic ”more training” ”more resources” if they want to make an impact.

It is important to note that students may complement information provided in the role play with more knowledge about the case. They may even use Wikipedia, and read up on related issues, and dig deeper to explore the effects of the case in the local and even global community. As some students are more prepared, as they have for example read the suggested articles and have had a brief look at a PhD thesis on the case, students are also enabled to reflect on ”facts” that are not in the case, which further highlights the importance of domain specific knowledge for critical thinking (Bailin et al., 1999).

These inconsistencies in preparation and imagination together with the problem of revealing your hand and fighting others to shift the blame, create opportunities for synergies and conflicts (Hickel, 2019). These are the instances where a forum where students can have a dialogue is created (Komasinski & Ishimura, 2017) and where students get a chance to balance conflicting values to discuss how to move towards a sustainable future, even though there is no clear right or wrong answer at the end of the role play, thus no clear winner of the role play.

Conclusion

To conclude, when teaching sustainability we need to adopt tools that are open for interpretation and flexible enough for different perspectives to be played against each other, and case-based methods may be a tool we can use. By incorporating dilemmas (Brookefield, 2012) and conflicting values (Wals & Jickling, 2002), we can create situations where students engage with each other in discussion. As educators, we must be adaptable, and must use flexible and open-ended tools that encourage students to question, reflect, and engage deeply with the material. As highlighted by Lannefors et al. (2020), even small adjustments to cases can significantly enhance their effectiveness in promoting critical thinking and sustainability. These small adjustments then may potentially enable students to realise that there is always something beyond and that there is a need to go deeper (Mintzberg, 2004).

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