

Feedback based on observations during evaluation workshop for  
“**Planteles Educativos Sustentables: Compartiendo Saberes**”

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Janice Astbury

Independent Consultant and PhD researcher, University of Manchester

*This feedback is offered as a contribution to reflections on the project and may be used in reporting to stakeholders.*

I very much appreciated the opportunity to observe this evaluation process. I have been directly involved in sustainable campus projects as both student and teacher and have followed a variety of initiatives across Canada through my work with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. In the context of my background in this field I was very impressed with both the evaluation process and what it surfaced about the project, specifically the following strengths:

### **Social Innovation versus benchmarking**

*Planteles Educativos Sustentables* is an excellent model of a sustainable campus initiative oriented towards social innovation. Many initiatives to date have operated within an Environmental Management System (EMS) framework where the focus is on meeting a series of benchmarks. While this approach has been very helpful in defining the characteristics of a sustainable campus and providing a framework for institutional commitment, it does not generally take full advantage of the energy and creativity of stakeholders. *Planteles Educativos Sustentables* has created space for students, teachers, administrators, support staff, and in some cases the surrounding community, to engage fully with the initiative. The evaluation surfaced many examples of how this range of actors had initiated and were carrying out projects that incorporated their skills and interests.

The EMS approach also tends to put universities and colleges in competition with one other as they vie for the highest score which they can then announce in their marketing material. The very collaborative nature of this project within and across campuses reflects the sort of multi-stakeholder and multi-institution collaboration that is necessary to achieve social, economic and environmental transformation.



## **Focus on building relationships**

The designers of this initiative understood that in order to create the space for innovation, they needed to invest extensively in building relationships within and among the campuses before they determined specific project activities (and they fought the necessary battles within their institutions to not pre-define activities and thus keep this space open). The investment paid off; it was very clear during the evaluation process that the success of this project was directly linked to it being driven by dedicated people in relationships of trust. The importance of relationships extended to the initiation and overall management of the project where the long-standing friendship between the project initiators/coordinators helped to overcome numerous challenges.

The trust that exists at all levels has encouraged commitment and perseverance in project implementation, as well as providing space for experimentation and for documenting failures as well as successes. The close-knit network that has developed over the course of the project has served as a continual source of motivation and support; providing inspiration and information, as well as materials and physical labour to bring projects to fruition on participating campuses. If one campus is struggling, the larger 'system' of the network has been able to rally around and sustain it until things turn around.

As is common among projects involving international exchange, the learning and inspiration offered by cross-cultural experiences were considerable. The fact that this project focused so much on

building relationships and reflecting on practice, as well as fully engaging so many members of the campus community, made these effects even more significant.



## **Fully engaging the capacities of all stakeholders**

The ability to fully engage the capacities of all stakeholders was supported by explicit reference within the project to the hierarchies of power that characterize most educational institutions. It was made clear through a variety of means that relationships of power must be recognized and reconfigured in ways that allow ideas and solutions to come from any part of the system; people must learn to recognize one another and work together outside of their roles.

One important strategy was having an engaged and engaging project coordinator present the project to the campus community as a whole and invite any member of this community to take leadership within the initiative. This created an open and supportive space while simultaneously communicating and transferring a clear and interesting mission to promote sustainability. As a result, everyone was invited and encouraged to appropriate the space in ways that aligned with their own capacities and interests. The leadership

that was demonstrated by the students participating in the evaluation workshop and the collaborative relationships among students, teachers, support staff, directors and members of the surrounding community that were in evidence during the evaluation made it clear that efforts to allow leadership to come from any part of the campus system had been effective.



### **Multiple forms of complementary support and capacity building with demonstrable impact on students**

The project partners ensured on-going capacity building opportunities through both workshops provided by the project as well as activities incorporated into the curriculum of participating institutions. Responsive support was also provided when challenges were faced and it was mentioned how one coordinator was constantly keeping an eye out to see who needed support—and who needed recognition. The effect of these opportunities on the students was particularly evident. Students participating in the evaluation described how training opportunities and coursework, as well as support from various mentors (including students from other campuses with whom the project allowed them to interact) impacted on their capacity to work together, engage

others and carry out projects with tangible results on the ground.

Teachers also mentioned specific examples of having learned from approaches used by teachers on other campuses and of applying these in their own teaching, which in turn had an impact on students.

### **Facilitating engaged learning**

Students spoke of how much they had learned from specific mentors who taught them things about which the mentors themselves were passionate. It was clear that not only knowledge and skills but also inspiration and motivation had been transferred.

Students were also motivated by the fact that they were learning things that could be immediately applied in their projects. Sometimes the application touched another campus as in the example of students on a fundraising course at Dawson College raising funds for a project on one of the Mexican campuses. The enhanced learning opportunities provided by having students undertake internships related to specific projects at partner campuses, as opposed to more typical student exchanges, were also noted.

The project furthermore made links between more theoretical coursework and activities on the ground. For example students studying free trade agreements and the commodification of seeds participated in saving seeds from the campus garden for next year's tomatoes, giving them something in common, and in solidarity, with small producers.



### **Smart use of social media and other communication tools**

Social media was used very effectively in this project, helping the partners to feel continually connected despite their geographic separation and allowing them to share their learning and excitement. Students were able to communicate their experiences on their home campuses and during visits/internships at other campuses using blogs, photos, videos, etc. A teacher reported how he had received a message from another institution wanting to learn about and possibly replicate the project. This interest was inspired by the Facebook page, which managed to convey the spirit of the project in such a way that it inspired someone from another institution to say, "I don't know exactly what you're doing but we want it!"

Social media was also combined with other communication tools to engage a range of people in the campus projects. The other tools included presentations, site visits, posters and postcards that were designed in an 'Educational materials' course. Students demonstrated thoughtful analysis of how to formulate their messages and get them across to different audiences

Teachers shared their reflections and materials through a variety of means, including via B.J.Media's 'Cosas de profes' (<http://bjmedia.mx>) taking advantage of the multi-media website and high quality video broadcasting from one of the participating campuses.

### **Institutional and Personal Transformation**

The project reconfigured relationships among participants in ways that are likely to be enduring and influence the institutional cultures of the participating campuses. It was also reported that institutional boundaries were affected by the implementation requirements of this sustainable campus initiative where lines between education, research, fundraising and facility management blurred.

One student stated that the project made the campus community put mission and objectives related to sustainability into practice. The importance of students (including many who will become teachers) seeing stated aspirations translated into reality cannot be overstated when many students worldwide express cynicism about real commitment on the part of institutions. A teacher spoke about moving from teaching about composting to actually practicing it at home and about how the

project had caused him to overcome his cynicism about 'sustainability' as meaningless political discourse. It was also mentioned that the empowering nature of the project and the tangible results generated hope in the current context in Mexico where there is "a feeling of submission to violence".

Physical changes are visible on the campuses, which now benefit from new green infrastructure facilitating delivery of a variety of ecosystem services. In addition to new infrastructure, there were also examples of greater use by a broader community of existing green facilities. This not only has an immediate positive environmental impact but also provides 'learning and doing' spaces for students and teachers to carry on transforming their campus and themselves. It also sends a strong message to everyone who comes to the campus that it is not just feasible but also normal that campuses incorporate sustainable practices.



### **Living laboratories facilitating adaptive experimentation and learning--and offering significant research opportunities**

The open and experimental space created by *Planteles Educativos Sustentables*, along with the broad range of expertise and support provided by the many people who engaged with this initiative has meant that each campus has developed its own unique set of projects. These projects generally emphasize particular sustainability themes such as food systems, water or energy, combined with practices common to all, such as improving reuse and recycling and expanding climate-regulating vegetation cover. As each campus also has its own particular context and conditions and the whole initiative is framed as a

participatory action research project, the result is a series of living laboratories.

Students reported that they got the message that this was a space of experimentation, a safe place to try things and sometimes to fail. They were encouraged and supported to analyze their actions and the results. Teachers and other actors enjoyed similar support for risk taking. The adaptive experimentation and learning approach that was therefore present in these 'living labs' means that there has been a continual process of reflection and adaptation of strategies within each project and well as within *Planteles Educativos Sustentables* overall. The fact that this has been shared across the network makes it even more powerful. There is an opportunity to continuing capturing and systemizing this learning so that effective approaches are documented and tools are developed in support of future efforts at these campuses and across a broader network.

There is also room for deeper analysis of what is going on within each living lab. Additional resources could be brought to bear to create more explicit 'laboratory conditions' such as establishing baselines and monitoring changes, capturing the perspectives of different stakeholders throughout the process, modelling drivers

of change in social-technical-ecological systems, etc.

Several of the participating students were sufficiently interested and able to collect enough information to lead them to focus their undergraduate dissertations or equivalent projects on aspects of *Planteles Educativos Sustentables*. There may also be an opportunity to involve post-graduate students and possibly identify a group of interested academics who could set up a collaborative long-term research project.



Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the collaborative learning opportunity offered by this evaluation process!

Pictures from Evaluation Workshop taken by Manuel Mendarte Campos.