

Transcript of 'How to Teach Sustainability'

Season 2, Episode 23, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: In today's episode, we're hopeful! We're chatting about the future leaders of tomorrow, rebuilding society, and the role of business schools in all of this. Plus, Jan's alternate life in Berlin. [sounds surprised]

Let's chat to Jose Alcaraz, lecturer in Management at Lancaster University Leipzig.

[Theme music fades]

Paul: Jan, we talk a lot about all the researchers that we have across universities. We talk a lot to them about the work they do with business. We talk as well about the business schools that we work in, and how they operate sustainably, and the universities that, how they operate sustainably. Do you know what we haven't talked about?

Jan: No. But you're going to tell me, I fear.

Paul: We haven't talked that much about teaching the next generation all about sustainability.

Jan: That's true, and we've talked about future generations, and the importance of the future, but, but indeed, our, our youngsters that we take through the university system are the people who are gonna be there in the future. So it's a really important part of the mix.

Paul: Yeah. Understanding how they understand sustainability, how they understand the future of the planet, and where they see it all going. And then educating them, guiding them as best that we can to make it a better future.

Jan: I agree.

Paul: Shall we bring someone in who does this?

Jan: Yes, please.

Paul: Yes, because we're at Lancaster University, but we're at Lancaster University Leipzig as well today. 'Cause we're joined by Jose Alcaraz, who is a lecturer in Management at Lancaster University Leipzig, and who does lots of this teaching as well as some excellent research as well. Hello, Jose.

Jose: Hi, and thank you, thank you very much for having here.

Paul: Jose, can you give us a little bit of information then about yourself and your expertise, and how you've come to be working for us over there at Leipzig?

Jose: Right, well, I was quite privileged to have kind of a cosmopolitan career, because in the last 20 years I've been in Barcelona, my hometown, then I moved to Shanghai for some years, then to Dubai, then to, uh, the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean, then to Perth, Australia. Then Munich, then Lyon, and finally Lancaster.

And of course, one of the things that attracted me about Lancaster is, um, that it's really a research-based teaching institution. It means that we are able to bring really, really cutting-edge research to inform everything that we do in the classrooms, or our learning environments.

And of course, I also have to say that the Pentland Centre was another, to be honest, uh, key ingredient.

So I tend to tell the students in particular, you know that it's quite a privilege to be able to be in the university to get a degree, to get a master. It is not everybody can have this chance.

Um, many of us, uh, come with very interesting backgrounds, is myself and so many others of my colleagues, but also among the students. So I think spending some years of your life, uh, getting a degree is really a transformative experience to make yourself stronger and it's a privilege.

Jan: I know that you've written on both the Anthropocene and how we might manage within planetary boundaries, and I know both of those, uh, topic areas could be a whole podcast in themselves, so I'm gonna be mean to you and ask you to talk about both aspects of them.

So could you tell us something about how you think about the Anthropocene, and then also the idea of planetary boundaries.

Jose: Yeah. I've been really interested for almost ten years in bringing these cutting edge notions that have been developed in the journals Science and Nature, to bring them to the realm of business schools.

So how can we, in business schools, which we may not be ecologists, climatologists, uh, biologists, we are not.

But nevertheless, how can we bring the cutting-edge research that is produced, uh, by the cutting edge, uh, natural scientist teams, bring them to our business school's environment to help us, um, move forward innovative agendas for sustainability.

So when we think about all the discussions that have taken place around the Anthropocene, this idea that we are now the most brutal geological force, transforming the planet, we humans. Uh, this has tremendous implications for us as responsible leaders or future responsible leaders, and then understanding that we have altered the climate, the rivers, we have altered the oceans. This idea of the Anthropocene.

I think it's a must for us in the business world to be, uh, cognisant of that. And when we think about the planetary boundaries, which was, um, this framework was produced in 2009 by Johan Rockström and others, uh, bringing this cutting-edge research to our classrooms, to our learning environments.

To help us think that, yes, of course it's about climate change, but it's also about, uh, global challenges on water, on deforestation, on loss of biodiversity. Are oceans getting so much CO₂ that they are becoming acidic and putting in danger, uh, ecosystems and coral reefs, is the ocean depletion, is the plastics and the novel entities.

So looking at climate change as one, one big issue, together with other eight planetary issues that we should be, uh, aware of and thresholds that we shouldn't cross.

I think my work has been to kind of bring this into, um, discourses and narratives that are understandable and clear and simple for anyone. Uh, despite we may not be natural scientists. So I think this was an important task, uh, for the last years.

And now more interestingly, how can we educate, uh, the future leaders of tomorrow to grasp at least the essence of this? So how do we connect our business activities, our organisational activities, from the local and the micro to

maybe the regional and the planetary. Are we able to kind of, uh, make these crossing, make these connections, multi scholar connections? And I think these are quite, uh, relevant issues.

Jan: And even though students are, they know they're being invited to a transformatory experience, and they might not necessarily know exactly what that means.

So when they encounter these ideas from natural science, which is maybe not something that we're going to find out about, but then when you translate those natural science concepts through to why it would be important for them as managers, what, what kind of response do they have?

Are they, are they surprised? Are they, you know, cross to find out there was more to do than what they thought? Or do they themselves feel, you know, really, uh, empowered and enthusiastic about playing their part?

Jose: Well, I try to bring this notions from, uh, research on climate communications, for example, that we as educators, we really need to bring points of entry into these complex issues.

The idea of bringing points of entry so that we don't feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of this, uh, well, planetary issues, right. So can we bring points of entry so that I can understand as a citizen, as a student, as a manager, as a future manager, what is in my hands to do? So that I do something at the very local level, but perhaps thinking about, well, a planetary impact.

Is there something that I can do as a citizen? Is there something that I can do with my vote? Is it something that I can do with my consumption, with my food consumption, for example, which is a topic that I find tremendously important. Everything around food, diet, food waste, et cetera, for example, no?

So, um, I feel that the younger generations tend to be quite aware, uh, but of course there's a lot of work to do to kind of cut any sense of over being overwhelmed and bring points of entry. And this is one of the things that we can do as educators.

Paul: So, if we are gonna educate this next generation on all of these issues, if we are going to help shape the future responsible leaders that we're gonna need in business, in society, what changes do you feel is gonna need to be made within universities, within business schools?

Jose: Kind of at a macro level, we, I honestly think that we should rethink a lot how we think about economy as embedded within society, and society as embedded within the planetary boundaries.

So thinking about business within the planetary boundaries or the Sustainable Development Goals within the planetary boundaries, then puts the primordial stakeholder, the natural environment, not just another stakeholder, but kind of as, um, Mark Starik used to say, uh, kind of the primordial stakeholder.

So in a ways a reframing of the interlink between business, society, and nature, where everything is embedded within the planetary boundaries. I think that's a smart way to think about it.

This comes with a kind of a reframing of how we engage with institutions and partners. So we should really, I think in, particularly in universities, engage with people that have been talking about the global governance with people that have been talking about glocal effects, for example, the C40 Network of cities, that they are working at a local level to have a planetary level, so this beautiful notion of glocality.

We need to engage much more with the natural sciences in terms of contents. We need to engage with NGOs. Real reframing that I think needs to happen in terms of institutions, social engagement, contents and curriculum and then pedagogical practice, but we can talk about it uh, in a few minutes.

This is on the one hand. On the other hand, I think that particularly, for example in Lancaster, we are very good at everything around critical thinking. And I'm gonna give you an example of something I did very recently.

So I brought some students to, uh, kind of a protest camp that is taking place or has been taking place in the surroundings of the Megafactory of Tesla. So Tesla has, uh, started off Megafactory not far from Berlin.

There were a lot of young people protesting, and what they were saying is, first of all, nobody has seen any democratic process on how these conversations have taken place with this very powerful company, and this very powerful person, Elon Musk, and how they decided to, well, to start operations in Germany almost without anybody knowing.

So there's been a lot of questioning on, okay, what happened with the transparency process here? And we know that, uh, well, Elon Musk is a very,

very powerful person. And then the factory kind of came up one day, uh, out of nowhere, sadly, overnight. And these young people were protesting about this.

They were also protesting about, well, the Megafactory may in fact, uh, put in risk the waters that supply Berlin. The Megafactory will also create quite a significant deforestation.

Now, if we are critical thinkers, we will probably acknowledge that there are wonderful things coming from electric vehicles, but we will have a more broader picture, a more comprehensive approach. We may bring also a critical point of view saying, okay, do we need, for example, to be much more cognisant of things around transparency, uh, things around power.

And of course, if there are good things about electric cars, we may also want to have another debate, which is, do we need more cars in the street despite their maybe electric, or maybe we need more public transport? You see? So this kind of debate is what we can do from a place like Lancaster, right, which is to promote critical thinking.

Where we see all the different elements. We can see the beauty of electric cars and new technologies, but we may also be a little bit critical on, for example, a green capitalism. So everything comes from new gadgets. New objects, more robots, so we all have a one robot in our house, so we all own an electric car. Or maybe what we need is more debates around public transport, for example.

So this critical thinking is one of the beauties of studying, uh, a degree with, uh, what I think is our research based teaching institution. Right? And, of course there are also many other frameworks regarding what are the skills that we would like to see in future responsible managers.

So one framework would tell you that, for sure, we need ethical thinking, we need the strategic thinking because, at the end of the day, most of us will be business people, but we may also need, uh, long-term thinking. And the capacity to collaborate with multiple stakeholders. And systems thinking, so we are able to see that things are interrelated. Yes?

So biodiversity is connected to climate change, which is connected to water, which is connected to, et cetera, et cetera. So, there are different approaches to think about education or educating the different, the leaders of tomorrow these, these were just some, some, some thoughts.

But one more final thing. I believe that if universities are to survive for the many decades to come, I think we will for sure need to anchor our, the teaching experiences around challenges. So that students and learners coming from challenges that are of real interest for them, hopefully in alignment with real world organisations or companies.

So that should be student driven, driven by their curiosity and their real interest, and not by different disciplines. So challenge based in alliance with real world organisations that are working on those challenges. I think, uh, that's where we can provide value. 'Cause otherwise all the knowledge is available for free on the internet, on ChatGPT, et cetera.

Jan: And I can't tell you how it lifted my heart for you to go back to the idea of glocal and glocality. [laughs]

Um, Paul's got a bee in his bonnet about it, so thank you for that, Jose, you've helped me wind up my, my co-host in the most appropriate and wonderful manner.

Paul: I think you know full well my bee in the bonnet is nothing to do with the concept. More to do with the ridiculous nature of making up a word like 'glocal' and 'glocality'.

Jan: [laughs] We are, we are happy to be imaginative, I think.

Paul: [sarcastically] Mm-hmm.

Jan: [mockingly] Uh-huh.

So I want to keep, keep the focus on imagination and creativity, because I know that, um, you're a big advocate of using filmmaking and digital storytelling in, in learning, and I know that our listeners would love to hear more about that and how that works.

Jose: Yeah. Which I think it would apply to any instructor, any teacher of, of, of any discipline really. Uh, because having students to watch films is nothing new, that has been taking place for over decades. Students watching films, what for sure is much more interesting is the students producing films. Why is that of value?

Well, because they will have to put together a lot of, um, skills around cognition. Around behaviour, around relations with, uh, other team members to create a film, to create a project.

And most important is that when you invite students to create a film, they will be translating a very complex issue, whether it's, for example, climate change or is social injustice, whatever the topic is.

Whatever the discipline is, the moment you invite students to create a film, they will have to think about how to translate a very complex issue into a story. Into maybe a five to ten minute video, a five to ten minutes film.

That will mean that they will have to think about characters, story, plot, twist, surprises, location, sound, music, voiceover, camera angles, you see? So creating a film, as we published recently, becomes a wonderful, extraordinary medium to learn, because you have to put together all those things, you see.

And that means that it's not only fun or engaging, it means that you really have to put all your neurons to come up with, uh, something that is complex, translated into a story, into something that is, uh, meaningful, into something that is engaging you see?

So I had, for example, students who came up with, uh, a virus story. This was long before Covid, 2016. And they thought about biodiversity, loss of biodiversity and cities getting closer to, uh, tropical areas and others. And then, uh, maximising the possibilities of being in contact with exotic animals and getting viruses, for example.

So they thought about the story about viruses. Other students thought about, uh, a contest, other students thought about a detective story. And this, for example, I have a very funny story of students creating a film about detectives who were chasing builders, who were promoting deforestation, you see?

So the moment you bring this complexity into something that is a story, uh, you have to put it all together, all those, the story, the plot, the twist, the surprise, the music, the voiceover, the characters, what's going on, how to, you see?

So it's the fun, and more relevant than the fun is the learning.

Jan: And do students do this as a solo project or as a, as a group project?

Jose: A group project, yes. Always.

Jan: Yeah, 'cause that really, well, that makes it maybe more achievable, but then you've got all that thing about team working and coordination and, and

resolving things together, which I think is a really super way of deepening that learning experience as well and making it very social.

Jose: Also normally is, excuse to, for example, they spend one day out in a field trip. So some students were visiting a, a farm others were, uh, visiting a, a factory, others were visiting a river, a lake, you see?

So, so it's the, it's the outdoor experience, a field trip in a group, it becomes a significant part of the learning, yeah, the environment for to, to produce that learning.

Paul: And a lot of this obviously involves the use of imagination, and I know you've also done research on the power of imagination, speculative fiction. How does that fit in with regards to sustainability? And within that, I know is the concept of Afrofuturism. Can you explain what that means as well?

Jose: Yeah, before going there somehow, if you look at the research on climate communications by Maxwell Boykoff and others, what the, it's become very clear is that we need many, many different narratives.

So sometimes we need the hard data and the scientific discourse, but other times we may need different narratives. For example, some people may not care so much about climate change, but they may care, um, about a more religious understanding of the world. For example, caring for God's creation, or the notion of stewardship.

Some people may be a little bit reluctant on hearing the words climate and change, but they may be more attuned to, for example, this course that talks about energy security, for example.

You see, so how do we connect with people from different walks of life that value different things. That forces us to go beyond just the scientific traditional narrative or the deficit model. The idea that, okay, uh, hitting people with more data on the head will make them react. Yes? It's just about having more and more and more data.

This idea of the information deficit, it's, uh, is really not working. It's not only about providing more and more data, more and more scientific papers, so we need different narratives.

One, some of those will relate for sure about, uh, imagination. Those may be, for example, science fiction. Or it may be climate fiction and all the work that is

allowing us to feel, how could, I don't know, what are refugees feeling or in their own skin?

So there is a lot of, uh, novels as a genre that, uh, invites people to think about, uh, engaging stories that are fiction, but that nevertheless will allow the reader to feel and sense and process complex situations where technology, society, and environment have, uh, well, a certain complexity that, perhaps through a film, through a novel, through a short story, may be more approachable and, and in fact more valuable.

One of those trends around imagination and science fiction is Afrofuturism. Now, if you look at a lot of the innovations that have been developed, were inspired by science fiction. So the mobile phone, uh, uh, Mural visual collaboration, which is one tool that we use, uh, well for remote collaboration and design thinking, et cetera.

Many, many of the tools that we use today were inspired by science fiction. Now, what happens is much of that science fiction has been white and has been Western and has been from the global North and from the Anglosphere.

And there is a new trend, uh, Afrofuturism that is saying, well guys, how about if we think about a future where we have much more equality, where the different, uh, categories of oppression, and sometimes maybe gender, sometimes, maybe race, sometimes maybe nationality, et cetera.

How do we think about futures where there is much more inclusion and where the flourishing is not just for the middle class Global North white John Smith, blue eyes, but where we have all genders and races and nationalities.

Not only to expand to new territories, which is the main idea of traditional science fiction, we expand to new territories, in Afrofuturism, the idea is not to expand to new territories, whether it's from Spain to Latin America 500 years ago, or from the earth to Mars. But in Afrofuturism, they talk more about expansion of freedom, not expansion to new territories, you see?

So there's a lot of fresh air coming from speculative fiction that is called Afrofuturism, which talks about inclusion, talks about seeing the wisdom that we can find, for example, in ancient Africa, but also in other parts of the Global South.

It's, uh, very radical in allowing inclusivity of race, nationality, gender, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So they came up with very refreshing ways to, to think about, well, how do we wanna build society?

And I think in business schools, this is an area where we may benefit a lot from, from exploring these, these approaches.

Jan: For our listeners, we'll put some link to Afrofuturism, uh, as a resource at the bottom of the podcast because I think people will find that really, you know, engaging and, and really useful to have a, have an entry point to that.

And I suppose it really speaks to, um, what you said before about, you know, cosmopolitanism, which we're, we're gonna talk about now.

So by the time you do Barcelona, Shanghai, Dubai, Santo Domingo, Perth - Australia Perth, not Scottish Perth, Munich, and Berlin, then you're, you're bringing all of these perspectives and understandings from different places, and in particular, you don't become a citizen of one place you maybe become a citizen of, of the world.

So that's often captured under this title of cosmopolitanism. Could you tell us a bit about that?

Jose: Well, in fact, I think that when we look at the global environmental change in every level, uh, um, when we look at what's going on, on, well with nature, with the global environmental change is really, really, uh, it forces us to see ourselves as just, uh, citizens of our, of one planet, citizens of the world.

So in the past, this philosophical notion made a lot of sense, but I think if today it makes sense, it's precisely because the, the, our globe, our planet is so interconnected.

For example, you, uh, in the Stockholm Resilience Centre, they've shown that, for example, um, in the Arctic, the people that live in the Arctic are suffering horrible levels of pollution and you just think, wow, but the Arctic is a pristine, clean, untouched part of nature.

And you would say, well, no, it happens that a lot of pollution from Africa and North America just goes to the Arctic. So, uh, these teleconnections, as they call it, um, made very clear that everything is interrelated or everybody knows, yeah, a country like Bangladesh has done very little to produce climate change, but they are among the first to, to suffer it.

So, in such a small world, I believe that it makes a lot of sense to think about ourselves as cosmopolitan citizens, as citizens of the world. Some people may disagree and they would think, okay, well you know, some people don't, don't wanna be part of this game, like indigenous in Australia, whatever, they just want don't wanna be part of this, so why do you wanna kind of put them in this basket? And I think there's a real interesting conversation to take place around that also.

Paul: Going back then, Jose, before we finish, to your students and what you see of them, what you see in them, how do the students that you work with give you inspiration and optimism for the future?

Jose: Well, a couple of things. First, I think we need to recognise that very young generations, uh, live in quite a challenging moment. I mean, I mean, um, things around the economy, things around, uh, uncertainty, things about lack of peace in many parts of the world. So the instability is quite significant.

I also think that daily life of many of young people are quite shaped by the influence of social media. And this brings wonderful things, but also significant disconnections with others, and with the possibilities of easily accessing science or more trustable sources.

So I think we need to be to acknowledge that, uh, daily life for many of our students can be a little bit challenging. And that's where I think also our role, uh, uh, be becomes so meaningful, right? Because we may be agents for bringing, well, a little bit of more of rigour, a little bit more of thinking critically, et cetera.

So having acknowledged that part, uh, because I live in Berlin and then I work in Leipzig, and this is kind of almost, uh, they are super connected, it's just, uh, less than 90 minutes away. Uh, so I live in a very young context.

So for example, half of the population in Berlin is 45-year-old or less, you see. And there is a lot of innovation taking place. For example, on if you look at the, uh, magazine, Wired, uh, and the hottest startups, well many of them are in Berlin and they have to do with, uh, carbon credits. They have to do with new molecules. They have to do with, they're working on early detection of wildfires, for example. They are working on new molecules. They are working on cool applications of blockchain to allow people to, well, to be identified or food to be identified in global supply chains, et cetera, et cetera.

So many of the people driving these startups, many of the people driving these startups in the region of Berlin, Leipzig, et cetera, are quite young, and they come with a lot of energy and, and hunger to, yes, to make money, yes, but to create a really positive impact on the planet. So, that I think, gives me, uh, optimism, hope.

Jan: If I had the chance and I was young, I would live in Berlin. I just think it sounds, you know, I've, I've visited it, um, once and really enjoyed it, but it, it just sounds so, you know, exciting and lively and, and just so much going on there. So I really envy you being in Berlin 'cause I think it, it sounds great.

Jose: Well, one, uh, one, one other thing that I believe it's, it's really, um, encouraging is that there is a lot of exploration and interdisciplinary exploration. So this means that there you have people collaborating around the arts and ecology, for example, or chemistry and the arts, you see? Uh, or politics and art and ecology.

So there are uh, foundations, a lot of small grassroots, almost artisanal associations, really, really bringing creativity. But from a radical, radically multidisciplinary approaches, you see? So I think that that is really fascinating.

Jan: That's brilliant.

Paul: I've been to Berlin too and I loved it. I don't know I'd want to live there though. Bern in Switzerland, if I could afford it, that's where I'd live.

Jan: Yeah, trouble is, if you have to go to a place, if you can afford it, you probably are not like the people who can afford it...

Paul: ...yes...

Jan: ...that's my worry about, you know, really great but expensive places.

Paul: Yeah, there's lots of them about that, uh, look wonderful, but you can't afford to live there.

I think you probably could just about afford to live in Berlin or Leipzig.

Jan: Okay. Well, um it's always options...

Paul: ...and if I ever want to get rid of you, I know where to send you.

Jan: [laughing] You, you'd be most welcome to...

Jose: Jose. Thank you very much. It's been a wonderful conversation.

Jose: Well, thank you. Thank you very much for this time together.

Thank you very much.

[Theme music]

Paul: It's fascinating, Jan, isn't it? To hear about how that next generation think and feel when it comes to sustainability, and how they learn and develop what they think and feel through education.

Jan: It is, and what I read, the, one of the key concepts that he talked about, and there are many, like, super concepts that he was talking about, was points of entry.

And I thought that was really smart. And picking up on the communications literature and realising that different people at different stages of their life and having different experiences of what life is like, will have very different points of entry and that there, there are language that might be talking about exactly the same thing, but actually how it's framed really matters for people's ability to, to hear it, to listen, to learn, to grow.

Paul: I experience this a lot because I have to communicate complicated research that comes out of this university to people who don't understand academic language.

And I know I've spoken several times in this podcast about the joys of academic language and how it can be completely baffling. And so many papers and concepts might seem baffling, but they cover key topics that people should know about and there needs to be a way of communicating that to that wider audience.

And an audience that you have, almost a captive audience in some ways, uh, for all of this work is the students who are in your classroom, in your lecture theatre, in your seminar room.

Jan: And I like the way he was talking to them, about them as future leaders, which indeed they are. But he also highlighted that they, at the same time, they're, they're currently citizens and are going to be future citizens as well.

So a wide framing that allows them to understand the world as citizens, and then maybe a different kind of framing that might help them understand what they might be doing as corporate actors and leaders of corporations, actually having both of those frames in the mix, um, is quite important.

And, you know, some of that is about private value. Some of that's about public value, but actually we live in a world where public and private, um, come together.

Paul: I think you're getting ahead of yourself with public value and private value 'cause that is something we will be discussing in a few weeks time. [Jan laughs].

Um, but yeah, I, I totally get that and I totally, love the concept and what he's saying about the area he lives around Berlin and Leipzig and the number of startups there, and the energy and vitality of the young people who are there.

And that is something that you associate with young people generally, energy and vitality. And if they can apply it to sustainability and responsible leadership and have that education behind them to push in that direction, then that's key.

Jan: Absolutely. Um, future generations and future generation thinking is something that we picked up with Nick Barter, um, quite a few podcast episodes ago, in the first season. And, and here it is, popped up again.

Paul: All of these concepts keep coming back to us. A bit like the circular economy only [Jan laughs] with concepts and, uh, podcast guests.

Yes. We'll keep recycling them until eventually we, we've run out, but we haven't run out yet. Which is brilliant because we've got lots more interesting guests still to come on this series and many, many more I'm sure in the future.

Next week we're gonna be sticking with young people and sustainability. We're gonna be talking to Darren Axe, who used to work here at Lancaster University, and now he works with an organisation that specialises in getting students involved in sustainability,

Jan: And it'll be a nice additional example of thinking about that energy that comes from the younger generation, but also again, you know, maybe I'm, I might be labouring the point this generation is inheriting something quite tough.

They know they're inheriting that. And so their, um, propensity and desire to change and to shape the future is, is really strong. And I think that's a, a very inspiring thing to be in a university and to be able to see that firsthand.

[Theme music]

Paul: So we'll hear more about that next week. Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jane Bebbington.

[Theme music]