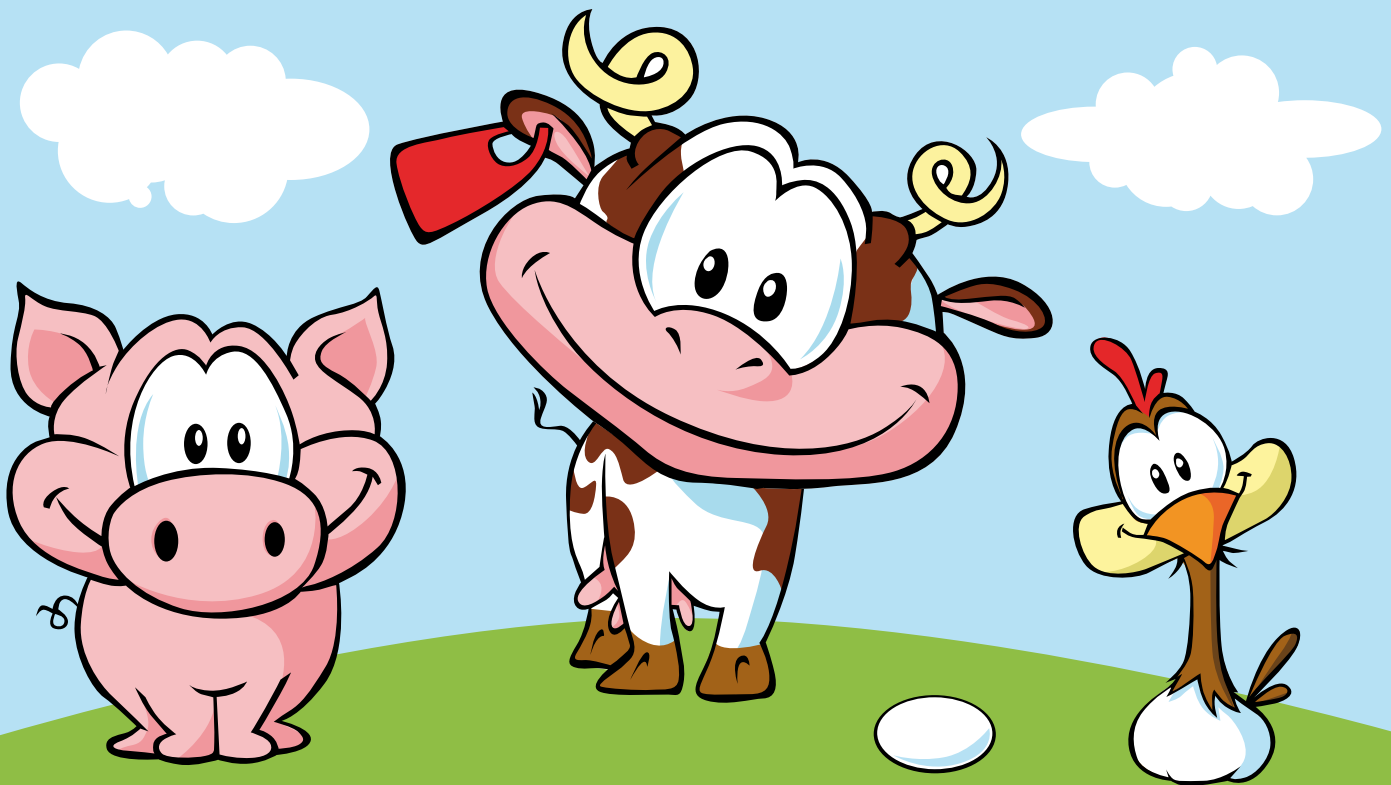


PICTURING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

DAVID HICKS



David Hicks believes that all schools should aim to become 'sustainable schools' given the major changes that lie ahead for the present generation of children now in school. One vital tool in this is the use of future scenarios to prompt discussion on the changes that need to come about to help create a more sustainable society.

Sustainable schools

In 2009 the UK's Chief Scientific Advisor, John Beddington, warned that we could face problems ahead in relation to food, water and energy unless we learn to live more sustainably. How, then, can we help children develop the knowledge and skills needed for living responsibly in a future which will be very different from today?

DCSF guidance on sustainable schools succinctly describes the task:

'A sustainable school prepares young people for a lifetime of sustainable living, through its teaching, fabric and its day-to-day practices. It is guided by a commitment to care;

- for oneself (our health and well-being)
- for each other (across cultures, distances and generations)

- for the environment (both locally and globally)' (DCSF, 2008).

Over the last few years the value of this approach in schools has been increasingly recognised. Ofsted visited a sample of schools over a three-year period and found that their focus on sustainability had a wide range of positive consequences: 'Sustainability captured the interest of young people because they could see its relevance to their own lives and futures. There was evidence of an increase in knowledge and understanding of the importance of leading more sustainable lives, and there were examples of more positive attitudes to learning, better behaviour and attendance, and improved standards and achievement' (DCSF, 2010).

Eight doorways

Many of the issues explored in geography in school, whether local or global, relate to the twin concepts of sustainability and unsustainability. Put at its most simple any human activity is sustainable if it can continue fairly indefinitely without causing harm to people or the planet. Alternatively, any human activity which results in on-going harm to people or the planet is the opposite – unsustainable. In preparing lessons for each of the 'eight doorways' (Figure 1), teachers will need to understand

how each doorway illustrates an aspect of unsustainability and sustainability.

Energy and water
Travel and traffic
Food and drink
Purchasing and waste
Buildings and grounds
Inclusion and participation
Local well-being
Global dimension

Figure 1: The eight 'doorways' to sustainability. Source: DCSF, 2008.

Take 'food and farming' for example. In what ways does it illustrate these opposing concepts?

Some existing unsustainable practices

Children's health

Obesity is a growing problem among children and in society more widely, and it leads to all sorts of associated health problems – globally there are as many overweight people as undernourished people.

School meals

As experts like Jamie Oliver have pointed out, we urgently need to improve the quality of school meals in the light of the above, but such change is still not as widespread as it needs to be.

Enough food

There is enough food available in the world for everyone to eat adequately but only if it is shared out equally. In the UK we eat food as though the country had six times more land and sea space than it does.

Food for animals

Many crops in rich countries are used as animal feed to produce meat, milk and dairy products. More food can be grown in the same area to directly feed people. Most people in the world eat vegetarian diets.

Industrial farming

Farming in rich countries depends on intensive chemical inputs to produce cheap and convenient food. Consequences include major soil degradation, pollution, loss of biodiversity, high food miles and unfair trade.

Food shortages

Given rising oil and food prices, we can no longer take it for granted that cheap food will always be available. The UK may well have to become more self-reliant and move towards the goal of feeding itself.

All of these dilemmas arise out of practices during the twentieth century that were intended to improve quality of life. However, while they brought great gains for some, they have also had consequences which are ultimately unsustainable.

Some existing sustainable solutions

Food for Life partnership

Food for Life (2010) is a network of schools committed to transforming food culture. Schools focus on four key areas: food leadership (a whole-school approach), food quality (seasonal, fresh, local and organic ingredients), food education (cooking, growing and links with organic farms), food culture and community involvement (the dining experience and community links). It also highlights the links between different aspects of food and farming.

Awesome changes

Professor Tim Lang, who advises the government on food policy, says 'awesome changes' are needed in food production. With oil becoming more expensive (and its use contributing to global warming) there needs to be a return to earlier methods of food production, including the re-learning of lost gardening skills. Extensive orchard planting is needed, as at present 90% of our fruit comes from abroad, and cattle and pigs need to be fed by grazing on hillsides instead of consuming 40% of the UK's crop production.

Organic growing

While one official report argued that organic food is no healthier than chemically grown food it failed to take into account the difference in fertiliser and pesticide residues found in foods. The debate about GM (genetically modified) crops will intensify. GM is part of a technocentric vision that aims to control

nature, while an ecocentric approach focuses on the need for biodiversity and organic principles, i.e. working with nature.

Food security

Many examples of sustainable agriculture are already being implemented by national and local organisations, such as the Soil Association (2010) which promotes 'planet-friendly food and farming' through education, campaigns and community programmes. Britain needs to grow more of its own food in the future while facing probable water shortages, needing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change.

These examples of positive action for change in relation to food and farming all call for a more joined-up form of thinking that emphasises the interdependence of parts which had previously been seen as separate. This vision of wholeness is central to any meaningful notion of sustainability, for the whole is always more than the parts.

Using scenarios

Scenarios are 'pictures' of possible futures. They often occur in written form but for classroom use visual scenarios are best. In the example given here (download at www.geography.org.uk/pg), different aspects of a more sustainable future for food and farming are illustrated with comments and questions. This makes it possible for pupils to engage in 'future fieldwork' and to see how such changes could lead to the transformation of our lives, relationships and landscape.

Food and farming 2050

1. Questions to ask about the scenario

This can begin with individual or small group work which then leads on to wider classroom discussion and debate.

Look carefully at the scenario and imagine you are visiting this future with a group of friends to gather information about it. You can look around to see how things are different and also listen to what people are saying about life in this future. Make some notes in response to each of these questions.

- What are the first three things you notice about this future?
- In what ways is this future different from today?
- What are people doing and saying that is different?
- What are the advantages of living in this future?
- What questions do you have about this future?

2. Questions to ask about your local area

A scenario such as this can be used as the impetus for a wider project researching the local area. There are three elements of the locality that should be considered: i) the school itself; ii) the neighbourhood, village or town; iii) home. The questions below, or similar ones as appropriate, should be applied first to the school and then to the

local community. Some of the questions may then be applied to home. For each question there needs to be two response columns: 'What we already know' and 'What we need to find out'. The second column becomes the basis for further school and community enquiry.

- Where does some of your food come from? How many miles has it travelled?
- How can you eat more healthily and learn more about the food you eat?
- Where is the nearest farm to you and what do they grow or rear?
- What is the nearest source of organic food to you and how is this produced?
- What would you like to know about how to grow and cook for yourself?
- What evidence have you found in your school and community of changes already happening that will help to create a more sustainable food future?

3. Some concluding questions to ask

At the end of such an investigation the following sentences can be completed.

- I have learnt...
- I now feel...
- I personally intend to...
- With others I would like to...
- I think that the school should...

These activities are taken from David's latest book *Sustainable Schools: Sustainable Futures: A resource for teachers* (Hicks, 2010), which contains detailed information for the teacher and visual future scenarios for pupil use on each of the eight doorways.

References

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- Hicks, D. (2006) *Lessons for the Future: The missing dimension in education*. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publications. Available from: www.trafford.com/06-130.



Download the scenario used in this article: www.geography.org.uk/pg

For more details of David's work see: www.teaching4abetterworld.co.uk
Food for Life Partnership www.foodforlife.org.uk/
Soil Association www.soilassociation.org/

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