

Daniel Greenberg, the founder of Living Routes, shows what academia and ecovillages can gain from one another. Together, we can transform higher education into a rich soil that grows knowledge and projects that support the regeneration of our planet.

Ecovillages – Academia

Daniel Greenberg

We are living in a unique time, not just in human history, but in *planetary* history. From the war in Iraq to the war on rainforests; from global markets to global warming – it is clear we *must* learn to live in ways that honor all life. Yet, as a species, humans seem almost evolutionarily unprepared to address the global issues facing us. For the most part, business is going on as usual; governments– at best –are thinking ahead only to the next election; and, as Oberlin Professor, David Orr has said, ‘We are still educating the young as if there were no planetary emergency.’

We now need to move beyond the industrial era and begin to train leaders for the 21st century – leaders who know how to *heal* the Earth and build durable economies and sustainable communities. But how? Einstein once said, ‘We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.’ So perhaps we also need to move beyond the ivory towers of traditional academia and create campuses and pedagogies that are better able to educate for a sustainable future.

Worldwide, ecovillages are striving to create high quality, healthy lifestyles *and* low ecological impacts. These ecovillages are developing and refining ecological and social tools such as community-scale renewable energy systems, ecological design, organic farming, holistic health and nutrition, consensus decision making, and mindfulness practices such as yoga and meditation.

Ecovillages are increasingly being used as ‘campuses’ where students learn about sustainability while actually living it. Ecovillages such as Crystal Waters (Australia), Findhorn (Scotland), and Auroville (India), and in North America such as Sirius, EcoVillage at Ithaca, The Farm, and Earthhaven, have already had considerable successes as educational centers and in creating ongoing partnerships with government agencies, research centers, and schools of higher learning. And organizations such as Living Routes are helping to build bridges between ecovillages and academia by creating college-level semester programs based in ecovillages around the world.

Why Academia needs Ecovillages

To understand why ecovillages offer ideal campuses for sustainability education, we need to compare them with traditional universities. Regardless of what classes students take, the following list illustrates the hidden curriculum, or ‘metanarrative’ as Chet Bowers would call it, that students learn simply through their day-to-day participation and involvement:



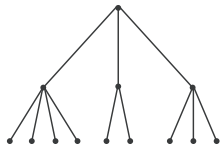
Conservative vs. Experimental

Universities tend to be burdened by cumbersome bureaucracies and are slow to change. In fact, the basic structure of universities has not significantly changed since the Middle Ages.

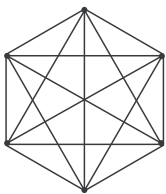
Ecovillages are physical and social ‘laboratories’, experimenting with new technologies, social structures, and worldviews. They tend to have a trial and error mentality and are quick to adjust to changing conditions, challenges, and opportunities.

Living Routes students engage in a sharing circle at Sirius while preparing to travel to Auroville, India

Hierarchical vs. Heterarchical



The power structure of universities is very top-down, with power emanating from the president down to the provosts, deans, faculty, and – at the bottom rung – students. The hidden agenda is one of ‘power over’ and submission to authority, which is consistent with the conventional attitude that humans are meant to dominate and subdue nature.



In ecovillages, there is a wide diversity of relationships and members tend to interact on more or less an equal footing. Individuals might cook a meal together one day, sit in a budget meeting another day, and perhaps help harvest vegetables on yet another. These interdependent sets of relationships help members get to know each other

on many levels and better understand the complexity of living systems.

Competitive vs. Cooperative

Universities are competitive on all levels – among students for the best grades; among faculty for grants, tenure and recognition; and among schools for prestige and endowments.

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While competition exists within ecovillages, the norm tends toward cooperation with members assuming as much responsibility as they are willing to handle. The success of individuals is typically viewed as inherently tied to the success of the community as a whole.

Fragmented knowledge vs. Transdisciplinary

Universities have responded to the exponentially increasing rate of knowledge generation with ever more sub-specializations within disciplines. Pat Murphy, director of Community Service in Yellow Springs, Ohio, refers to the 'silo' mentality of higher education where institutions 'stockpile' knowledge within discreet containers that are functionally isolated from each other.

Ecovillages recognize that real-life issues rarely exist within the boundaries of disciplines. For example, the decision to put up a windmill requires knowledge within the fields of appropriate technology, engineering, regional and community planning, governance, and even sociology and anthropology. The decision to create an organic farm crosses disciplines of agriculture, nutrition, philosophy and ethics, business, education, and communications among others. While able to train specialists, ecovillages are uniquely positioned and equipped to train much-needed *generalists* who possess 'lateral' rigor across disciplines to complement 'vertical' rigor within disciplines.

Academic Community vs. Living Community

Many students claim that 'gaining a sense of community' is a primary motivation to attend college. While this is certainly available, it is also true that most relationships in academia are mediated by specific, rather narrow roles – student/teacher, fellow researcher, classmate, etc.

If a sense of community is the goal, wouldn't it be more fulfilling to immerse oneself in a 'living' community where members have a wide range of relationships, hold a common vision, and are committed to each others' long-term growth and development? Small class-size, the use of authentic assessment methods, and the creation of 'learning communities' in which students have opportunities to deeply reflect on and share about their experiences further support their learning and growth.

I believe humans are 'hard-wired' for community and tend to resonate with human-scale institutions in which they can both know and be known by others. Margaret Meade, the noted anthropologist, observed that for 99.9 per cent of our evolution, we lived in tribes. Many people in modern, 'developed' countries have lost a sense of community so thoroughly that their closest acquaintances are characters on TV shows. The sense of belonging that students experience within ecovillages both awakens and fulfills a need that many did not even know they had. And once nourished, this sense of belonging tends to expand to include ever broader communities – both human and non-human.

Theoretical vs. Applied

Academic types tend to stay in their heads – and their armchairs – and maintain a detached, theoretical perspective of the world. Researchers use the myth of ‘objectivity’ as a rationale to stay removed from their subject matter and, consequently, often create knowledge, but rarely wisdom.

Ecovillages, in order to survive and prosper, must focus on practical knowledge and wisdom that can be applied in real-world settings. Theory is in the service of ‘what works’ rather than the other way around. Ecovillages are inherently ‘experiential’ – a word that many universities are loath to even use. Students often claim they learn more through internships and service learning opportunities than in even the best seminars.

Secular vs. Spiritual

Not only are most universities very hands-off, they also tend to separate our heads from our hearts – and typically only care about our heads. Consequently they tend to support a Cartesian view of the universe as a soulless machine to be manipulated and controlled by humans.

While some are explicitly religious, most ecovillages embrace a larger, more eclectic spiritual container in which members are supported to be ‘in process’ and engaged with large questions of life and meaning. Yoga, meditation and silence are common features of many ecovillages and students on Living Routes programs have pursued vision quests as a way to deeply reflect on their relationship with themselves, each other, and the world.



Students at Findhorn meet with long-term member, Craig Gibson in an underground Kiva

Large Footprint vs. Small Footprint

Universities are beginning to incorporate more ecological design and building, but for the most part they are still incredibly resource intensive institutions and not very attuned to their impact on their region or the world. Recycling and compact fluorescents are recent phenomena on many campuses and very few campuses even attempt to buy food locally, not to mention organically.

Ecovillages strive to live well, yet lightly. While many assume ecovillages aspire to self-sufficiency, this is rarely accurate. Most look to their bioregion or watershed as the unit of land and culture that should become more self-reliant. Ecovillages often serve as regional catalysts for reducing ecological impacts by supporting local initiatives such as organic agriculture and local distribution networks so resources do not have to be shipped great distances.

Cross-Cultural vs. Cultural Immersion

Most campuses enroll students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Yet typically these lifestyles and traditions are subsumed under the melting pot of the academic culture with few opportunities for cultural expression or exchange.

In ecovillages, perhaps because they are 'living' rather than 'academic' communities, there tends to be fuller expressions of members' cultural backgrounds through festivals, rituals, language, and food. Even further, in traditional, indigenous ecovillages, students have the opportunity to truly

American and Senegalese students use horse drawn carts to travel across sandy dunes to remote ecovillages in Senegal



immerse themselves in vivid and full-featured cultures that both honor the past and are consciously reaching towards the future. For example, on Living Routes' programs in Senegal, US and Senegalese students join together to explore sustainable community development within indigenous ecovillages, which provide rich contexts for cross-cultural exchange and understanding. These programs are frequently life-changing experiences in which students experiment with and adopt wholly new ways of being and thinking.

Problem Oriented vs. Solution Oriented

Last, but perhaps most important, universities tend to be primarily focused on dissecting and understanding 'problems'. It is obviously critical that we continue to study and better understand the serious local and global issues facing us. But there comes a point when students 'get it' and need to either *do* something about it or risk becoming overwhelmed with negativity and despair. Worse, some students even become emotionally numb in an unconscious effort to defend their hearts against the seemingly insurmountable social and environmental problems facing humanity and the Earth.

Ecovillages give students important opportunities to be a part of the solution and learn how they can make a positive difference in the world. They are not utopias, but after spending time living and learning in an ecovillage, students can never again say, 'It can't be done', because they see people wholly devoted to right livelihood and creating a sustainable future. It then comes back to students to ask themselves, 'What am *I* going to do? How can *I* make a difference in my own life and in my own community?'

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Why Ecovillages need Academia

The above comparisons may seem like an argument to run, not walk, away from traditional academia, but there are also important reasons to build bridges and work together.

First, academia is changing. With an increasing internationalization of the curriculum, interest in community partnerships, and recognition of the need for ecological design and interdisciplinary research, universities are beginning to see ecovillages as natural collaborators. Also, technological changes such as the internet and distance learning are making the large infrastructures of campus-based universities increasingly irrelevant and out-dated.

Second, universities are not going away anytime soon. In the US, higher education is approximately a \$350 billion/year business. That's the GDP of Belgium! And this is not counting the *trillions* of dollars invested in facilities and resources. And universities are where the students are! Two out of every three high school graduates in the US go directly to college and nationwide more than 16 million students are currently enrolled. Worldwide, there are approximately 88 million college students (more than the population of Germany!) and this number is expected to increase to 100 million by 2010 and possibly 150 million by 2025.

Third, ecovillages need help in order to reach their highest potential. As advanced as ecovillages are in terms of providing campuses for sustainability education, I believe they are still in *kindergarten* in terms of what is truly needed to educate professionals capable of building the institutions and systems required for a sustainable world to be possible. While programs offered through Living Routes and individual ecovillages are a good start, we need to further collaborate with academia to create ‘communiversities’ where students can spend *years* in ecovillages and other related organizations and gain the background and skills needed to enter the workplace as professionals in fields as diverse as appropriate technologies, habitat restoration, sustainable agriculture, group facilitation, holistic health, ecological design and green building.

The fourth, and most important, reason for ecovillages to reach out to academia is that college-age students represent a powerful leverage point in the world’s ‘Great Turning toward a more Ecological Age’, as Joanna Macy refers to it. Many talk about members of the college population as ‘emerging adults’ in that they are mature enough to ask the big questions yet also open to radical alternatives and new life directions. Emerging adults are key to the dissemination of emerging paradigms and the world desperately needs leaders who are able to think – and act – outside of the box. The novelist Frederick Buechner once wrote that, ‘Vocation is the place where one’s deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.’ Never before has this been more true – or necessary. Building bridges between ecovillages and academia is literally building bridges to a more sustainable future. What an amazing time to be alive! What an honor to be a part of this Great Turning!



Daniel Greenberg has studied and directed community-based educational programs for over 15 years. He visited and corresponded with over 200 US intentional communities for his PhD dissertation on children and education in community, and later spent a year at the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland working with children and families there. He is the founder and Executive Director of Living Routes, which develops accredited ecovillage-based education programs that promote sustainable community development. He lives at the Sirius Community in Shutesbury, Massachusetts USA with his wife, Monique and their two daughters, Simone and Pema.