

Final Report: Senior Researchers Stay at University Of British Columbia

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Researching how to educate change agents via transformative learning at the
University of British Columbia

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In July/August 2019, I had the chance to visit the University of British Columbia and learn about educational activities concerning sustainability challenges. Particularly, I wanted to deepen my expertise in transformative learning in the context of ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) and how it is realised in higher education courses at UBC with partners from outside the university.

On my first day on campus, I met with Tim Herron from CIRS ([Centre for Interactive Sustainability Research](#)), who gave me an overview about the Campus activities at UBC regarding sustainability, especially the [UBC Sustainability Initiative](#). Beside the encompassing sustainability management activities of the UBC (for example the initiatives to prevent birds from flying towards the windows of university buildings and thereby care for the biodiversity on campus), Tim Herron offered me some insights about the efforts to foster interdisciplinary collaborations between UBC researchers. UBC strives for bringing sustainability efforts in research, teaching and campus activities to every corner of the university – which seems successful and challenging at the same time due to its size.

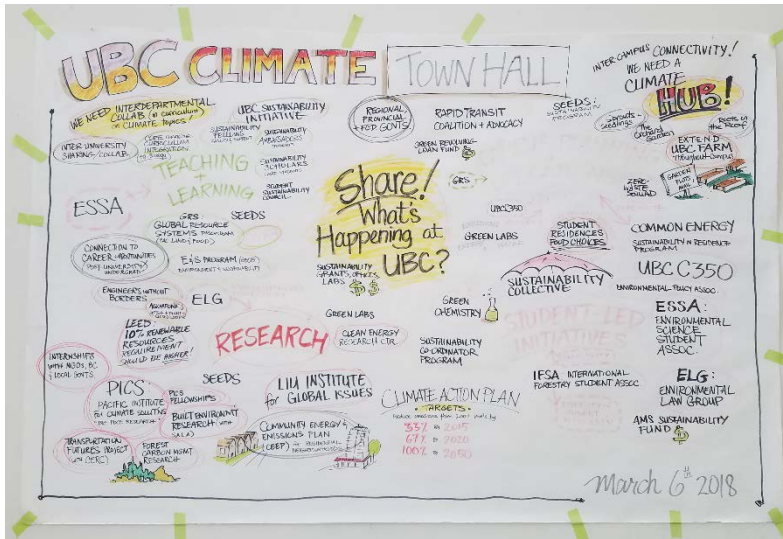
At the evening of this day, a public discussion between University of California President Janet Napolitano and UBC President and Vice-Chancellor Santa Ono took place: [Agents of Change What role should universities play on global issues like the climate crisis?](#) This inspiring public talk brought together the Californian inventive spirit (that boosted the sustainability developments at University of California) and the UBC ambitious strategy of responsibility (including efforts to divest as a university from fossil fuels).

On July 23rd, I had the chance to talk to [Pierre Walter](#), p professor for adult education at the Department of Educational Studies, who researches Community-based Ecotourism, Museum Education and Social Movement Learning. He offered me an overview of typical programmes at the Department (many focusing on partnerships with community-based organisations) and gave me some in-depth insights how he is facilitating transformative learning processes in the practice of his own classes. Besides a theoretical introduction into theories on adult learning, he supports learners to create their own projects and thereby enables the development of learners' self-efficacy in pushing initiatives for social

justice in local communities. Pierre pays much attention to creating safe spaces for dialogue and learning, identifying the resources of all learners and fostering hope to contribute to sustainability challenges – here, we found many similarities in our teaching approaches.

On July 30th, I talked to Kshamta Hunter, Manager of Sustainability Student Engagement with the UBC Sustainability Initiative. She gave me an introduction to the different programmes for student engagement within the UBC Sustainability Initiative (i.e. the leadership programme [Sustainability Ambassadors](#), the [Sustainability Student Network](#) or the [Student Sustainability Council](#)). Besides this encompassing work, Kshamta is conducting a PhD project on transformative learning with a particular focus on leadership competencies. Currently, she is thinking about a comparative study between Vancouver, New Delhi and Berlin, and we are in touch about a possible research stay in Berlin in summer 2020.

My exchange with [Will Valey](#), Senior Instructor and Academic Director of the Land, Food and Community Series at the Faculty of Land and Food Systems, took place on 1st of August at the [UBC Farm](#). The farm is a 24-ha teaching and learning space originally initiated by students in the late 90ths and now used for different experiments regarding sustainable agriculture as well as community connections. The farm is located on the traditional territory of the Musqueam people – one of the most important First-Nations tribes in Vancouver. Will Valey gave me an overview of the different gardens and territories as well as ongoing gardening and community activities at the farm. Besides a reflection on the courses he is offering to students directly on the farm, he told me about a particular course together with Vanessa Andreotti: [In Earth's CARE Residency 2019](#). In this course, the students got an introduction to post-colonial studies and sustainability research, followed by an 8-day camping excursion at the Kainai reserve in Alberta. During the time at the reserve, the participants had the opportunity to witness and take part in a First Nations' ceremony that centres the land and emphasised the existential dimension of sustainability. Will and Vanessa Andreotti were using frameworks, which involved ecological, economic and cognitive justice and aimed not only for opening up student's epistemologies towards different human and non-human beings, but also interrupting the students' being in the sense of deepening their entanglement with the world and all surrounding beings.



I got more profound insights into a students' perspective on the different sustainability activities at UBC in my meeting with Michelle Marcus on August 12th. She is involved in various initiatives: she is the leader of the 350° initiative in Vancouver that strives for divestment of public institution, took part in the sustainability ambassadors program and initiated

the student-driven [UBC Climate Hub](#) - a new university-wide initiative for connecting and empowering different stakeholders to take climate action. Michelle told me about the different formal and informal possibilities on her own learning to be a change agent, especially in and through social movements as well as student-led activities directly on the campus.

One of the most encompassing efforts in Vancouver to foster transformative learning processes on real-world sustainability problems is the [City Studio Vancouver](#), whose aims and strategies I got to know through Ileana Crestnut on August 12th. As the city of Vancouver strives for being the greenest city in 2020, the city funds the City Studio to foster projects that connect the expertise and engagement of students from all the Universities in Vancouver with the needs from the different city departments. The student-led projects strive for cultural change in the different organisations through building relationships between the different organisations and thereby follow an experimental path inspired by a theory of change based on trustful relationships.

met with Susan and Naoko on August 13th and deepened my exchange on how to realise transdisciplinary research projects and connect them also to learning and teaching activities. The day after I had the chance to participate in the program of Robert von Whynsberghe on [Education for Sustainability](#) (August 14th), where different participants (from local schools, civil society organisations and community centres) have the possibility to learn more about EfS beside their regular occupations. The day focused mainly on post-colonial theory and indigenous perspectives in education. Both of the lecturers, Rob van Wynsberghe and Pierre Walter, used a wide variety of interactive teaching



methods (comment cards for scientific articles in the preparation, the discussion of different philosophies behind educational activities in the context of sustainability etc.) and created an amazing room for dialogue and exchange between the students and themselves.

Finally, on my last day, I could meet with Jean Marcus, who is coordinating the [Teaching, Learning and Student Engagement activities at the UBC Sustainability Initiative](#). The Sustainability Initiative emerged from a 25 years long engagement of passionate academics that was institutionalised in 2010



as an outcome of a broader strategy process. Until now, they have developed a broad range of programs and initiatives to foster sustainability among the staff of UBC. One of the most impressive activities for me are the [Sustainability Fellowships](#), where UBC-staff can connect and learn from each other regarding their own approaches to sustainability teaching. Another amazing program is the [Interdisciplinary Education Grant](#), where academics can apply for funding for the development of innovative courses (one of these courses was the In Earth's CARE described above).

Altogether, the research stay gave me interesting in-depth insights into the teaching and learning activities in the most advanced university in Canada regarding Education for Sustainable Develop-

ment. Especially the post-colonial activities, talks about the appreciation of indigenous knowledge and the ongoing efforts of reconciliation with the First Nations in Vancouver were impressive and thought-provoking impulses for me. As post-colonial theory is gaining attention in Germany as well and fits perfectly to the theory of transformative learning, I will use in future teaching and research activities.