How do I overcome resistance to sustainability initiatives?

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Changing the mantra

"Use less paper. Bring a rubbish free lunch. Walk to school. Switch off your lights. Pick up litter. Turn off the tap. Use the compost bin..." Instructions like these have been echoing down our school hallways for years. The great news is that some people are listening. There are schools across Australia that have started integrating sustainability into their daily operations and community culture.

I think, however, that our communities may be suffering from a ‘sustainability fatigue’. Recently, I’ve been considering the power of traditional messages that ask schools to ‘save the planet’ and ‘protect the future’. People seem to tune in or tune right out. Not surprisingly then, the most common question being asked in Cool Australia’s online professional development courses is, ‘How do I get others on board?’. My suggestion is that it’s time to change the way we talk about sustainability in an education context.

One way we can change our messaging about sustainability education is by appealing to people’s identity and their sense of belonging. George Marshall, UK climate change communications expert explains that humans are pack animals – our identity and values are influenced by the social networks and communities to which we belong. However, more traditional messages about sustainability often run like this:

‘This is what people like me (not you) care about. People like me tell you about this. People like you tell you something quite different. When you do this you become less like you and more like me’.

This type of dialogue undermines important messages being communicated. Why would someone want to leave their pack? Why would they want to be less like themselves and more like another? George Marshall argues that our messaging about sustainability should be saying, ‘This is who you are already. This is what you care about. People like you agree and are doing this. When you do this you belong to your pack even more’. There are ways that we can appeal to existing ‘packs’ in our school including groups of teachers, other staff, students, children and parents.

Sustainability is learning

One of the most powerful ways we can reframe sustainability education is to pare back our use of the words sustainability and the environment and start talking more about learning. Learning is the universal language of all schools, it is what brings members of ‘the education pack’ together. Talk to any teacher and they’ll pretty much say one or more of the following:

‘I want to provide learning experiences that...
... engage my students
... help my students have a better quality of life
... provide a promising future for my students
... meet curriculum objectives
... make my job enjoyable

Sustainability education is a powerful tool that provides students with practical, hands-on and real-life learning experiences. It ensures young Australians are equipped with the skills, knowledge and understanding that will enable them to adapt and thrive in our ever-changing world. We should be talking about sustainability education in this way, with less emphasis on messages that are causing sustainability fatigue like recycling bins, planting trees and switching off lights. Education for sustainability is Maths, it is Science, it is The Arts, it is Geography, it is English. This subtle shift in dialogue appeals to the universal language and core values of teachers.

The goal is meaningful teaching and learning. The means is sustainability education.
Sustainability education ensures young Australians are equipped with the skills, knowledge and understanding that will enable them to adapt and thrive in our ever-changing world. Education for sustainability is Maths, it is Science, it is The Arts, it is Geography, it is English.

About
KIRSTY COSTA began her teaching career as a primary classroom teacher and went on to be an education consultant and mentor. She is the Professional Development Manager at Cool Australia and delivers online courses, webinars, workshops and keynote addresses to educators across the country. See www.coalaustralia.org.

AITS Standards
Reading this article is likely to help teachers understand more about the Sustainability cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum and achieving change in schools. Reading and reflecting on this article is a professional learning activity aligned with AITS Standards
2.1.2 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area
6.3.2 Engage with colleagues and improve practice
7.4.2 Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities
There are many approaches that you can use to get people to work with you on a new initiative. The ideas below follow a process that Cool Australia implement in their professional development program (with some additions from TLN).

1. KNOW YOURSELF
   - What are you trying to achieve and why?
   - What are the core beliefs that motivate you to act on sustainability?
   - How well do you manage change?

2. KNOW YOUR PEOPLE
   - How well do you know the people in your workplace? What motivates them? What are their core values?
   - It often helps if you have a framework to understand common attitudinal groups. Some people might use the Myers-Briggs program. At TLN we have used the Four Rooms of Change model which has a “coping with change” scale you can use with your staff

3. IT’S ALL IN THE MESSAGE
   - Investigate whether facts really do motivate people to change, (think about smoking – it is incontrovertible that smoking is devastating for health and yet people still smoke)
   - Analyse communication by watching a range of advertisements – or when it is on, view Gruen Transfer (or one of its specialist iterations) on ABC.
   - Cool Australia recommend the work of Chip and Dan Heath and their book, Made to Stick. They are all over youtube, the quickest summary (about 5 minutes across two parts) can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7U74c0Hzbk

4. EXPANDING THE COMFORT ZONE
   - Explore the factors that help people move slowly out of their comfort zone and embrace change including:
     - Autonomy
     - Familiarity
     - Relevancy
     - Social proof
     - Enjoyment

5. MAINTAINING MOMENTUM
   - Consider how to set realistic goals for yourself and others
   - Find out if incentives and rewards really work (intrinsic v extrinsic motivation)
   - Learn how to build on what is already working
   - Identify how you can celebrate the big and small steps to change

More information about enrolling for this professional development activity with Cool Australia can be found at http://www.coolaustralia.org/getting-others-board/
How can I link CROSS-CURRICULUM priorities?

Sustainability and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
The Melbourne Declaration identified three key areas that need to be addressed for the benefit of individuals and Australia as a whole. In the Australian Curriculum, these have become priorities that give students the tools and language to engage with and better understand their world at a range of levels. They enable the delivery of learning area content at the same time as developing knowledge, understanding and skills relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia and Sustainability. Incorporation of the priorities will encourage conversations between students, teachers and the wider community.

http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/crosscurriculumpriorities/overview/introduction

THEA NICHOLAS
CURRICULUM DIRECTOR, COOL AUSTRALIA

Cool Burning – an integrated curriculum approach for the middle years

Approximately 23% of the Australian mainland is covered in tropical savanna. Australia’s tropical savanna is made up of about 1.9 million square kilometres of dense grass and scattered trees that stretch across Northern Australia from Broome to Townsville. Each year in the late dry season, hot bushfires sweep through a large proportion of this area causing significant damage. These burns destroy everything in their path, including natural habitats and farmland.

For tens of thousands of years, Indigenous Australians have actively managed the savanna using cool burning techniques. Their knowledge of the seasons and local conditions have enabled them to manage the land through the effective use of fire. Traditional Aboriginal methods of managing Country through early dry season cool burning has been shown to dramatically reduce the incidence and intensity of hot fires later in the dry season. Cool burning reduces the amount of damage done by hot fires to ecosystems by promoting new plant growth and clearing natural waste materials.

Through collaboration with scientists and policymakers, Indigenous land managers are breaking new ground. Hot fires in Australia’s tropical savanna contribute one to three percent of our country’s greenhouse gas emissions each year. Using cool burning techniques, Indigenous land managers are generating a local long-term economy for their community through carbon credits. Projects that earn carbon credits are providing employment for young Aboriginal people, empowering them to remain on their traditional land. Renewed traditional management practices are also inspiring them to learn more about their heritage and has given them greater respect for their Elders.
Using the resource material

These snapshots are taken from the Cool Australia – Cool Burnings resources located at www.coolaustralia.org/unit/cool-burning-primary/ with some additions from TLN.

ENGLISH CURRICULUM
Central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and culture is the sharing of knowledge and world views through oral communication. The Cool Burning teaching resources contain rich video content of Indigenous rangers telling their story. Students can watch John Daly, an Indigenous ranger from Fish River, telling his personal story. Daly explains why he cares for Country and the benefits of using Cool Burning. Discuss with the class John Daly’s storytelling skills - https://vimeo.com/79269861.
(You might like to compare it with the visual storyboarding technique referenced to in the science curriculum below)

MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM

Use the menu to obtain monthly rainfall or temperature records for a location of your choice. Once you have made your choices and clicked ‘Get data’, go to the bottom and get the monthly totals.

Cut the data from the report - e.g. highlight and hit Control X. Paste the data into an Excel spreadsheet or a similar application. Once you are working in the spreadsheet, experiment with the charts found under the menu item ‘insert.’

Choose a graph (chart) that best interprets the data.

SCIENCE CURRICULUM
Cool burns are a land management technique. Started soon after the wet season, before the grass completely dries out, cool burns do not damage plants, seeds or animals to any significant extent. During a cool burn the grasses on the ground burn slowly, allowing most of the small animals to escape.
Seedlings, green grass, tree trunks and fallen logs are not burnt or damaged. The rising heat from the burning grass usually won’t singe the eucalyptus leaves above. Overnight, the cool moisture in the air will put out any remaining fires before the morning.


What is the difference between hot and cool burns? What are some problems with hot burns?

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES CURRICULUM
As a class, view the video ‘Historical burning’. Historical burns - http://vimeo.com/79466988

Discuss the following questions with your students:
• Historically, what has fire been used to achieve?
• How have the activities of Indigenous Australians impacted on the environment?
• What are the main issues presented in the video?

ARTS CURRICULUM
Have students view several of the videos on Cool Burning from the Cool Australia website.
Have them view websites which show bushfires in the Australian environment (do a google search for images of bushfires in Australia). Have the students create a powerpoint or prezi presentation for younger students to explain the difference between Cool Burning and bushfires. Emphasise the importance of constructing visual images rather than text for students with limited reading skills.

TECHNOLOGIES CURRICULUM

For tens of thousands of years, Indigenous Australians have actively managed savanna areas using fire. Their knowledge of the seasons and local conditions enable them to manage fire effectively. Indigenous people traditionally burn country to promote the growth of abundant bush tucker, to improve access to certain areas and to protect important sites from destructive wildfires. After Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory stopped looking after the savanna, the country became more vulnerable to hot fires. These wildfires can burn for days or even weeks. Hot fires can cover vast areas of land, creating significant impacts on our environment and the pastoral industry. In some areas, over half of the land gets burnt by hot fires every year. Without cool burns at the start of the dry season, hot burns can get out of control, consuming vast areas of accumulated fire fuel. It has been proven that the reintroduction of Indigenous Australian fire management practices - such as cool burning at the start of the dry season - can dramatically reduce the incidence and intensity of hot wildfires later in the dry season.
Watch two or more of the videos from the Cool Burnings units of work - [www.coolafrica.org/unit/cool-burning-primary/](http://www.coolafrica.org/unit/cool-burning-primary/) and then have students debate whether Cool Burnings is a technological solution to sustainable living. This will involve them in an investigation of what is meant by a technology solution. As an extension activity students could investigate the CSIRO website on fire management [http://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Extreme-Events/Bushfire](http://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Extreme-Events/Bushfire)

About
THEA NICHOLAS began her teaching career at Brentwood Secondary College as a teacher of Science, Mathematics and also undertook the leadership role of Sustainability Coordinator. She is now a Curriculum Director and helps Cool Australia provide free-to-access lesson plans. She is also fellow at the Centre for Sustainability Leadership.

The Cool Burnings resources were developed with the help of Nature Conservancy, Fish River Station and photographer Peter McConchie who has supplied the photos.

Cool Australia is an award-winning, not-for-profit organisation that helps educators become designers of exceptional learning for all young people. Over 40,000 early childhood, primary and secondary teachers currently use Cool Australia’s award-winning and free-to-access curriculum resources in classrooms across Australia and participate in a variety of online professional development [www.coolafrica.org](http://www.coolafrica.org)

### AITSL Standards
Reading this article is likely to help teachers to understand more about the cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum.

- 2.1.2 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area
- 3.2.2 Plan, structure and sequence learning programs
- 3.4.2 Select and use resources
- 7.4.2 Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities

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**DESIGN EXCEPTIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

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