

PODCAST 3 Taking leadership in sustainability.mp4

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:00:09] Hello, I am here with John Thorne, he is the Sustainability Coordinator for Glasgow School of Arts, and I have a pleasure to talk to him today in the morning. Thank you very much, John, for accepting to take part in these series of Conversations podcasts. I don't know. How do you want to call it for me? Everything the same. But anyway, so if you are happy, I will ask you the first question that I am curious to hear from you. So in your perception, what are the benefits to pursue a career on sustainability that can be related to sustainability?

John Throne [00:00:55] Thanks Thereza. It's great to see you again and to be involved with your students, so hello to the students. So I'm an environmentalist at the Glasgow School of Art, which is a bit strange, how have an environmentalist at an art school, but it's because art and design is so much part of the solution for issues like climate change and biodiversity loss. I believe strongly that art has the power to connect people to issues. And you see art and you emote with it, makes you happy, sad. It makes you angry. It makes you do things and design. We need design to redesign our systems. So for me, a career in sustainability has led me here through the tortuous route, through hotels, banks, hostels, milkmen, all sorts of things. Another thing I would say is there's no there's no wrong path. And we'll talk about career paths maybe later if we can. But I think what it does give you is a really rich understanding of what potentially is going on and how your career might actually do something positive. So whatever your discipline, it will help give you a richer, deeper, broader appreciation of your own subject. And that's the benefit to me as an environmentalist. It's it's got me knowing so much more about art and design. And we talk to our students with engineering students, psychology students. It's just it's just broadened what I know. It's giving me a much richer career path.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:02:19] So what are the challenges in pursuing a career related to sustainability?

John Throne [00:02:26] I think it can feel like you're going against the flow sometimes it can feel like maybe in any institution, managers and some subjects don't feel so related to sustainability. But sustainability is really just is ethics. It's equity. It's equality, it's social justice. It's good environmental benefits. It's it's a whole range of things you can apply to almost any subject. So the challenge really for me is actually making people feel connected to it. And it's a career you spend a lot of time working with people, trying to get them to do things with their within their own discipline. And that's why it's been great working with academics like yourself, who you get the fact that we need to think about environmental and social justice within other subject areas which which aren't traditionally green. So that that is just a great positive challenge, really. It's it's meant, again, I've had a great chance to interact to a whole range of disciplines so that the challenge is also to benefit.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:03:28] And which type of organisation do you think is harder to work on sustainability issues of multinational corporations?

John Throne [00:03:39] I think a lot of students are wanting to go to work for multinationals, and I don't have a problem with that because I think

John Throne [00:03:47] they have a

John Throne [00:03:47] career path and environmentally friendly ethical career path within a multinational. And I think we need new thinking, young thinking inside these corporations to try and get them to change their ways and to take meaningful action. So a lot of what corporations are doing at the moment, we all know, is pretty much greenwashing and it's not really helping. So I think for at least starting off. Maybe students don't have a choice, so they should go for the company they think will give them the best prospects. And that might be a NGO charity or it might be a corporation. It might be that you then go to something else after that. So there are plenty of people who work in the oil industry and then see the light and they're actually looking at things which are better than oil and gas. But some of our students, yours and mine, engineering students here will end up working for oil and gas and Jaguar and Ford

John Throne [00:04:41] and Idei and all

John Throne [00:04:43] the rest. I don't think they tell not to do that. I just hope that they can help change those those companies. And that's really the focus here to go to with awareness and to whatever you want to do in the future.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:04:58] So how do you think now we are going into the higher education. So because you have a very long track record on higher education. So how do you think institutions in higher education in the UK could improve their performance towards sustainability?

John Throne [00:05:23] This strangely has a lot to do with my own well-being. I used to get extremely stressed and like most environmentalist, a bit depressed and sit in a dark room for long periods of time. But really, for me, it's about each institution, each person in an institution doing their bit within their own subject or profession. So I can't really change at my level how estates work or procurement or academic teachers, but I can talk to them and maybe negotiate with them about how they teach or how they work. So getting the estates to build better buildings, look at their waste differently, reuse more on campus, improve recycling. I'm not a fan of recycling basically, but as a last resort, it's good. I think higher education really needs to bring it firmly into the curriculum. So mainstream it in every project, every program specification, every assessment criteria should have something to do with ethics, social justice and environmental. Everything we do should be linked to it rather than stand alone. Sustainability modules I don't typically teach those, I'm not an academic anyway, but I don't teach a sustainability module. I talk to a designer about how to be a better designer and artist

John Throne [00:06:41] to

John Throne [00:06:42] weave it into their work. So improving performance, there's the campus and there's the curriculum so the campus should look after itself. Estates should be building efficient buildings procurement at your University and mine I know will both be very good. They actually get it and it's usually cheaper to buy more environmentally friendly and things and to equip buildings better so they use less heat, less light. So sometimes it's built into the system. With the curriculum it's difficult, how do you tell history students, for example, or even an accounting student that its relevant?

John Throne [00:07:16] and it's building

John Throne [00:07:17] in that relevance, really.

John Throne [00:07:18] And academics,

John Throne [00:07:20] a lot of them weren't trained in this. I'm in my fifties and I have to say all through school, like a lot of the academics here know nothing about climate change. It was great. It was guilt free. It was there was no problem using anything you wanted, all the oil and gas. And those academics need to be supported to come up to speed as well. And that's just reflective of society. Some people get it and some people don't. The great thing is in eight years at the GSA, I'm seeing a lot more students get it. And that's really driving change managers. I know that your institution and mine are really starting to take notice. And and I would encourage your students

John Throne [00:07:54] to

John Throne [00:07:56] make noise and actually say they want more of this kind of more of this kind of work in the curriculum.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:08:03] Why do you think students are getting more engaged?

John Throne [00:08:08] I think they've got more to lose. I might last another 30 years and I don't want to get depressing, but I think most of the trouble will probably be after that. But I think in my lifetime, we can still expect to see climate

John Throne [00:08:21] weirding, heat

John Throne [00:08:23] domes. We've seen droughts and fires. I was looking at the world's biggest tree today in the news being wrapped in a fire blanket. So that's that's kinda weirding. And it's going to get dramatic. It's going to get

John Throne [00:08:35] very

John Throne [00:08:35] changeable. Certain areas are going to be very difficult to live in. So we're looking at things like mass migrations and droughts and fires and all the nasty things we don't want. And we can manage our way out of that and change our system. And students, I think, know they're going to be key to do it. It was people who looked like me and sound like me and about my age who've made this mess. And that's the peer group I'm addressing all the time to try and make that change.

John Throne [00:09:00] But certainly students

John Throne [00:09:02] in that key 18 to 22 year bracket we both work with are going to be absolutely part of the solution within their own subject areas. So I want to say a bit about general activism as well, because it's great to go out mentally during COP. I'll be out with a banner and doing the walks and I'm a cyclist. I'll be doing cycling demos. Absolutely during their careers. That is the biggest impact they can have on finding ways to apply their skills and knowledge that they learn at university and learn through their careers. And that is what is important for students, I think. And it's great for your mental health if you actually feel better, if you feel you're doing something. So I would say to any of your students that

John Throne [00:09:43] may be

John Throne [00:09:43] anxious about climate change. Yes, there's a really good reason to be anxious, but the solution is to think about the psychology of it.

John Throne [00:09:51] And I know

John Throne [00:09:52] I've talked to you before about Climate Psychology Alliance in Scotland, and that's a great resource. Climate Psychology Alliance Scotland have meetings and conferences, and that's really helped me understand why I was anxious and how to deal with it. And I deal with it through my work and I would encourage any student to deal with it through their studies, build it in and think about career paths and it just does you so much good.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:10:13] And do you think information, information, the way the information nowadays is being transmitted and is being received by younger generations, do you think this is a differentiator?

John Throne [00:10:31] I suppose you mean social media

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:10:34] Can we go to accountability? So, for instance, I think we have formal ways to account for different things, for climate change, for the use of water, for the use of biodiversity and accountability and sustainability. Transparency of information is part of these modules. So there are many ways we can be transparent. So not only in reports inside of the organization, but at the website and on social media, as you know. So how important do you think this communication is to solve the issues you you have mentioned in these in these video?

John Throne [00:11:27] I think transparency is key and also

John Throne [00:11:31] it's an

John Throne [00:11:32] interesting exercise to look at the companies that have maybe caused some of this problem in providing the goods and services that we all live by and use and thinking about how they're reacting. So a lot of companies will be greenwashing and just trying to carry on with their own. Business plans, so you and I both know any company I think will continue with their current business plan, the current tooling, they don't retool, they don't retrain, they're making money. That's the that's the capitalist way of doing things. And they'll try their very best to carry on like that.

John Throne [00:12:05] I think what

John Throne [00:12:06] transparency can do is highlight it, if that's happening still in a company and they're just adding a nice bits to look green. So, for example, BP is a really nice example. If you look at BP carbon footprint calculator, we're all encouraged to work out our carbon footprints. BP came up with that idea to deflect blame from what they do now. BP, I don't I don't really blame the oil industry because the oil industry does what it says on the tin. But I think they do need to transition very quickly and we need to help them transition more quickly. And that, again, goes back to students getting careers. You know, some students might go work for the oil industry. That's fine in my book if they can help it, encourage it internally to to transition. But I think what transparency can do is actually highlight what's being meaningfully done and what is not meaningful. And that is so important, I think, with corporations and our own lives. Are we being asked to do something meaningful or not if we're not and we're not transparent about it I think that's

bad for our mental well-being and for our careers. But if we can be transparent and if we can go in and actually think about how we can change that corporation, how we can communicate more effectively with people outside

John Throne [00:13:12] of it, then I think that's

John Throne [00:13:14] a really positive thing to do.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:13:17] And we see lots of fake news. So how can we deal with this in the environment of sustainability, in the context of sustainability, socially conscious, environmentally conscious? How do you deal with fake news?

John Throne [00:13:37] I think there's been a few films, books that have opened up my eyes about the lengths some companies will go to to actually deflect what they're doing. So a really classic one was furniture with a lot of people in the 80s, early eighties in the UK were setting fire to their furniture because they were smoking, drinking and falling asleep and the cigarette goes down and the chair goes up and a lot of people are dying.

John Throne [00:14:03] So what the cigarette

John Throne [00:14:06] companies did was they could have spent a few more cents on building a cigarette that goes out safely, or they could blame the furniture and fill the furniture with toxic chemicals that put out fires. So nowadays, to this day, when you go into a furniture store, you'll see a label hanging on a piece of furniture saying it's fireproof. And what this means is never buy new furniture by the way, what this means is every sofa, every chair is packed full with several pounds of this toxic carcinogenic material, this chemical, which will help put the fire out if the cigarette, goes onto the furniture. So that's a classic case of deflection. And the same people, the very same consultants that came out and argued that on television back in the eighties, back in the nineties and the 2000s, talking about climate change. And we've gone through it's not happening. It's not real to it may be manmade to it was probably limited stuff we can do in the current system to it will hurt poor people is the latest one. And poor people,

John Throne [00:15:05] people in the global

John Throne [00:15:06] south or people in the UK and Europe, in the Americas will be the hardest hit because people with money can protect themselves. So I think the answer there is to actually think about why is a company doing a particular thing? Why is Shell promoting an electric car race across Europe, for example, those sorts of marketing things, and try to see past the marketing and delve down to the reality check, things like reality check on BBC, check the website to try and check the companies, work with NGOs and and question what some of the NGOs are doing as well as some of the bigger ones are fairly corporate as well. And work with these companies and should you work with these companies? That's a question universities are always asking is what voices should we bring

John Throne [00:15:53] in to the

John Throne [00:15:54] university to speak to students? I think it's OK to bring in most people to be students as long as the awkward questions are asked, because we have the Plastics Federation coming here and speaking to students. Well, that's fine as long as students actually ask your questions to the Plastics Federation when they're here. So it's

about it's a bit of a voyage of discovery, I would say eyes open. Be aware, think about what the company's interests are and do they have a real change in mind. And it's just becomes an interesting journey then actually looking at what the companies do, you can with social media and because that's all very transparent, actually challenge them occasionally I go onto

John Throne [00:16:33] Coca Cola's

John Throne [00:16:35] website or someone else who produces a lot of plastic bottles. And you know I'll take a picture of a plastic bottle and I say, is this yours? Because I believe the Coca Cola still own that bottle, even though it's on the ground. Someones thrown it on the ground. They've got profit from that bottle. Someone else has drunk it. And I'm really concerned that Coca Cola aren't responsible for that bottle anymore. They don't have to dispose of it. So it's it's thinking like that when you see a plastic bottle on the ground, who owns that plastic bottle? Who made money from that? And all that person's has done really is spent money and probably gained a few pounds for buying from Coca-Cola.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:17:09] So if if we we are in in the higher education institutions. So we have different levels in which we we can be more proactive in sustainability. So we have the top managers, we have the academics and we have the students and we have the admin support, which is doing a wonderful job trying to recycling, trying to raise awareness. So do you have any advice for all these members of staff, what they can do? And how we can move forward the sustainability agenda?

John Throne [00:17:54] I think I work a lot with the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges. So terrible name. But it's EAUC and students can get involved with that as well. And they also offer professional support across universities. So there's a human support group, there's a construction support group, there's a curriculum support

John Throne [00:18:11] group and students can go

John Throne [00:18:12] to their conferences as well as and sort of learn what's happening right across all universities and colleges, because we're all dealing with the same issues at the Glasgow School of Art, at Aberdeen. They're no worse and no better than anyone else, really, as far as professional support goes. Yeah, I think a lot of people are trying to do recycling and buying better. And I've spoken about procurement and estates getting better and better each year, building better buildings and and using less heat and energy and our carbon footprints are coming down as well. Universities like St Andrews' are building huge wind farms, Edinburgh's got a huge team working on it. There's 25 people working in Edinburgh on sustainability. Nearly every university and college has someone like myself. But more importantly, I think, yeah, the managers are getting it. The academics are learning more about it as well. So I would encourage everyone. You want staff to look at things like carbon literacy training. So sometimes as an environmentalist, you get too deep into it and you realize that some people don't have the basic info. So it's a really good idea to start for anyone to start as simply as possible and then just work your way through it and also not to look. I would encourage anyone not to look to you. Yeah, I know my fill when I've had too many dark movies and films and books about how terrible everything is. My focus now is I know there's a problem and I know how to fix it. It's working through our existing system and changing it as quickly as possible so everyone has a part to play in that. So I focus very much on the positive aspects of what artists, designers can do here. And I think other universities have a huge role to play in things like geology, engineering

and business and accountancy. We can't solve it without every discipline being involved. So I think it's making sure everyone does their job because I'm one person in 350 staff here

John Throne [00:20:07] and there's no

John Throne [00:20:07] way I can fix the whole of the Glasgow School of Art, but I don't really need to. It's what students will leave here and go on and do that's the important thing because that affect will be millions of times more than what the effects of the GSA is at the moment. So I think it's a role for everyone and trying to educate people and inform people and build it into the systems across the university, campus and estate.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:20:35] Thank you very much. Do you have any other comments, any additional comments, any advice for accounting students?

John Throne [00:20:43] I think we're having a discussion sometime after this and I'll be really interested. One of the great things about my work is I learn more about subjects I know very little about. So I now know a fair bit more about design and and art. But I always like to speak to students with other

John Throne [00:20:59] disciplines

John Throne [00:21:00] and who are going to work in other sectors about what they think they could do as well and how they feel. And I'm always interested in how anxious you just things like this make people. Maybe this is something some students have thought about. Some students will will never build it into work. But I know the ones that do will have better career prospects and they're actually be able to help fix the issues we're facing and we're going to face in the future. So I would just

John Throne [00:21:25] say, if at

John Throne [00:21:27] all possible, get engaged, even if you're not a raging environmentalist, you know it can benefi your career, it can benefit how you work and the depth and breadth of your of your knowledge and how to work with other disciplines to fix issues.

Dr Thereza de Aguiar [00:21:40] Thank you very much for your time, and I'm sure the students will have many questions and am I'm sure they will be able to go back to you and we will sort it out in the way you can reply to them later on. Thank you for having me.