

## Participatory Learning for Sustainability

By Laura Sims, Ph.D.

I believe that education and learning are paramount when trying to enable a change in values and attitudes towards sustainability. For me, education is hope. My research interests have always been driven by a deep commitment to the environment and social justice. Specifically, I am passionate about creating opportunities that enable learning for sustainability, especially in real-life contexts.

Although the particular contexts of my research change (e.g., from working with small-scale farmers in Central America to working with academics in Canada), the common theme has always been learning for sustainability. My work is qualitative and interdisciplinary. Overall, I seek to create effective learning forums where people come together to discuss community needs and the environment, whether they be in formal or non-formal educational contexts.

For my doctoral research (2003–2008), I took a participatory learning approach to planning and implementing a community-based strategic environmental assessment (CBSEA) of the *Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad's* (ICE) agro-conservation program with rural communities in two watersheds in Costa Rica. This approach to environmental assessment, which was considered innovative due to its focus on facilitating learning through meaningful public engagement, built local capacity, enabling a more sustainable management of natural resources. In the study, participants were engaged throughout the CBSEA process, from planning to implementing four highly interactive workshops that represent steps in a strategic environmental assessment. I then assessed the learning that occurred during this collaborative community-planning process. Instrumental learning results included

- ▶ learning about CBSEA and its role in program planning
- ▶ developing problem-solving skills related to assessing impacts and creating mitigation strategies
- ▶ effective group-working strategies
- ▶ technical information

Communicative learning outcomes included becoming more self-aware and appreciating environmental conservation and collaboration. ICE learned how to use a participatory methodology and reconsidered the communities' role in program planning. Findings contributed to understanding both the process of adult learning in cross-cultural contexts and the link between individual learning and social action.

With respect to ongoing research, I was involved with a CIDA project in Central America from 2007–2013 that aimed to promote a more rational use of pesticides and

promote alternatives to conventional farming practices. Collaborating with Latin university colleagues, we integrated a participatory-learning approach during project planning processes and subsequently during outreach work with small-scale farmers in each country context.

My research looks at how implementing this participatory learning approach enabled sustainability-related learning outcomes with farmers and with Latin university collaborators. With both groups of participants, I focused on the importance of public participation in the CIDA project, particularly in decision-making processes, and this participation has enabled sustainability learning with regards to the level and quality of farmers' engagement in the project itself. Furthermore, I looked at how learning through public participation affects farming practices, farmers' perceptions of themselves with respect to the environment, and their engagement with their community.

In a Canadian context, I am still focusing on opportunities to enable learning for sustainability. I recently looked at what leading Canadian faculties of education are doing with regard to education for sustainable development (ESD). Higher education plays an important role in furthering ESD because of its impact on future and practicing teachers in the school systems. This study, which took place from 2011–2013, inquired into the current role of ESD in undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs at Canadian universities, with a particular focus on promising practices and initiatives toward a reorientation of teacher education for sustainability. The results of the study suggested the importance of experiential, inter-disciplinary, and inter-institutional learning, of problem-based learning around real-life issues with community and the natural environment, and of building partnerships with colleagues, students, and community organizations.

As academics, we are extremely fortunate to be able to pursue our research interests. For me, I love doing research. I love the adventure of field work, of meeting new people, and of working with small-scale farmers and university collaborators. Often, in the face of great resistance, the participants in my studies are incredibly dedicated and passionate about what they are doing, and I find them absolutely inspiring. I love the creative process of writing and of putting together ideas. Finally, in some small way, I hope that through this research focusing on learning for sustainability, I am able to contribute to theory and practice.

### Profile **Laura Sims**

Laura Sims, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Université de Saint-Boniface, Winnipeg. She specializes in education for sustainability and community-based assessment processes. Laura taught high school for 10 years in Winnipeg and in the Dominican Republic. For three years she managed a Canadian International Development Agency environmental project in Central America.

