Teaching business economics for sustainability with different interests in focus
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Introduction
Calls for the inclusion of ‘sustainable development’ in the business curriculum has increased significantly in the wake of financial crisis and increased concern about climate change. New teaching approaches are being developed with the expectation that students will be better equipped to address environmental and social challenges. However, there is also a concern that the concept of ‘sustainable development’ has lost the potential to address environmental and social challenges. It has been described as having become a wolf in sheep’s clothing that merely provides superficial solutions and supports the status quo, thereby taking the wind out of the sails of ‘the real’ environmentalists (Blühdorn, 2007; Fergus & Rowney, 2005). In relation to the business curriculum, education for sustainable development has been argued as being particularly challenging (Springett, 2005). The challenge is in part related to assumptions underpinning orthodox business theories. In short, the argument is that the assumption that all humans are driven by self-interest has a detrimental effect for societies by creating the assumed selfish behaviour. Research show that economists and students in economics indeed act more egoistically (Cohn, Fehr, & Marechal, 2014), although there is a disagreement regarding the effect of education, mainly because of the potential selection effect (Etzioni, 2015). I here seek to make a contribution to this field, not by adding an answer to this particular debate but by a study of educational practice in situ. Several studies show different kinds of socialisation effects (Wang, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2011). However, there is a lack of empirical research focusing the particular aspects of economics education that could have these socialisation effects. In this paper, I will therefore illuminate situations in educational practice where certain perceptions of appropriate actions emerge, are reproduced or challenged. Considering the current development of new teaching approaches to include sustainability in the business curriculum and the potentially detrimental effect of the homo economicus assumption, it is relevant to pay attention to the roles of a business person that are privileged when ‘sustainable development’ is integrated in business education. The purpose of this paper is therefore to contribute with knowledge about the roles of a business person that are privileged in business education when the concept sustainable development is integrated in classroom practice, and
how different parts of the subject matter and/or particular classroom practices open up for
different roles.

**Methodological approach**

In order to allow empirical openness regarding the role of business privileged in educational
practice I draw on antiessentialist and poststructuralist discourse theory (Glynos & Howarth,
2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001), which implies regarding the role of a responsible
business person as a social construct. From this theoretical perspective, the places and
processes (for instance classroom practice) in which the meaning of ‘the role of a responsible
business person’ is made are important study objects. This poststructuralist approach to
educational research is also inspired by the work of Cherryholmes (1988) who argue that
educational researchers should facilitate teachers’ and students’ critical reflection by making
discourses, and the rules, presuppositions and assumptions on which they rest, visible. In the
context of this study, this is considered important for teachers or anyone involved in the design
of educational activities and/or materials to identify, handle or avoid the kind of situations
where ‘homo economicus’ ceases to be a theoretical assumption, is talked about as a fact and
thereby (risks) ‘becoming real’. The analytical concept of a logic (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) is
used to analyse the roles of a responsible business person privileged by teachers in classroom
practice. Thus, analysing the logic that is articulated in a classroom is a way of capturing the
social construction of the role of business in a specific situation.

**The empirical material**

The empirical material was collected in five teachers’ classrooms, two years after a curriculum
reform that included integrating the concept of sustainable development into the business
economics syllabus at upper secondary level. The empirical material consisted of field notes,
20 video and audio-recorded lessons (transcribed in detail), images of the teachers’ notes and
written instructions on the whiteboard and the texts used in the lessons. The process of
collecting the empirical material, including the kind of ethical considerations that were made is
in part previously published (Andersson, 2016) and is further elaborated in the full paper. The
different aspects of the subject matter involved an analysis of a business annual report/financial
performance indicators, marketing/eco-labelling, branding, running a business and the social
responsibilities of a business. The teaching methods included lecturing, leading group
discussions and value exercises, supervising individual assignments and leading discussions
after watching documentaries about the consequences of unsustainable business practices.
**Analytical procedure**

As a first step I identified and described all the teachers’ actions that involved a depiction of what could be regarded as unsustainable, a description of other actors in relation to a business, a description of the conditions of doing business, or indications of what a business can or should do. Repeated actions, such as when a teacher asked a different student a similar question, were excluded in order to provide dense lists of teachers’ actions for each set of lessons. The teachers’ actions were listed in chronological order to facilitate an analysis of each action in the context of the lessons’ dramaturgy.

Second, in order to identify the logic or logics that emerged, the teachers’ actions were analysed in terms of how they, explicitly and implicitly, presented the rules and conditions of doing business and the role of a business person in the context of talking about sustainable development. As a result, I identified three logics of doing business sustainably, each positioning the role of a business person differently.

**The roles of a responsible business person in classroom practice**

In this section, three different roles of a business person that were privileged by teachers in classroom practice are presented. *The full paper* also includes detailed examples from classroom practice and general descriptions of the lessons in which the specific logic was identified to contextualise the examples. In this short paper the titles of textboxes 1-11 are provided to indicate where more detailed examples will be added, and one detailed example is provided under the presentation of the first role (adapt to self-interest) as a demonstration of the level of detail provided in the full paper. A comparison of the logics is provided in Table 1.

**Adapt to self-interest (in narrow terms)**

The first role of a business person can in short be described as one who should have control of the business from a ‘sustainability’ point of view, but who at the same time must be prepared to put personal feelings about sustainability aside when financial performance indicators ‘say so’. This role is positioned by the ‘logic of self-interest’ that was identified in three lessons devoted to analysing a business annual report, which also included sustainability reporting.
In short, the logic comes into play when a teacher, a) challenges (3.1.2) a student’s response that a business should take responsibility for the entire supply chain and argues that extra costs need to be taken into account and that the lack of demand for Swedish pork proves that consumers are not prepared to pay more for its control (3.1.3), b) describes the problem of acting in a competitive market (3.1.3), c) explains that shareholders will invest elsewhere if the profits are too low (3.1.4), d) explains that financial performance indicators are used when making business decisions in order to avoid a lack of profit and in their individual assignments instructs the students to use financial indicators to determine whether or not the business should prioritise sustainability work (3.1.4). Taken together, these actions depict consumers and owners as self-interested and as preventing sustainable business.

Textbox 1 – Customers driven by self-interest
Textbox 2 – Recycling organisations driven by self-interest

Textbox 3 – Self-interest as an obstacle to doing business sustainably

The teacher describes in great detail how a large Swedish-Finnish paper company, Stora Enso, has used young children to collect cardboard from a rubbish tip in a dangerous environment.

T (3.1.1): … so, we have a Swedish company working very hard with this [environmental and social issues] in Sweden that has partners far away that in turn hire people to work for them. And then we come to the next issue. How far is it reasonable to extend this CSR responsibility? We have had this with H&M that were ‘hard hit’ by awful working conditions in their factories in Bangladesh. One of their factories collapsed and many lives were lost about a year ago. The question is: how far is it really reasonable for a business to oversee the environment and working conditions of the sub-contractors? What do you say? Should every tiny supplier be investigated?

S: [firmly] Yes

T (3.1.2): Why?

S: I think you have that responsibility if you say that you are environmentally friendly.
T (3.1.3): Yes, is that reasonable? [silence] Then, how much should it cost? … How much is the customer prepared to pay for the control? … What they talked about now before the election to the European Parliament was pig farming in Denmark, where they can hardly move, but it means that the meat can be sold for 20-25% less than in Sweden. Leading to Swedish pig farmers shutting down. Because most consumers do not choose Swedish meat but the cheaper Danish, despite the fact that we know about the situation… and this is what you must consider… […]

T (3.1.4): (working out the financial performance indicators) I can see that it will be very low, can someone calculate this? […] so the shareholders will not be happy and they will say that they need to do something about this because otherwise would be better that to move their money elsewhere and make more. So, then, is the question of CSR something we ought to pay more attention to, or should we pay less attention to it because it is costly?

Respond to consumers’ increasing interest for sustainable products
The second role of a business person can in short be described as one who should work for sustainability by responding to consumers’ interests for sustainable products.

Textbox 4 – Addressing external demands for sustainability
Textbox 5 – Sustainability sells
Textbox 6: Organic farmers are successful

Be sensitive to stakeholders’ diverging interests
The third role of a business person can in short be described as one who should be sensitive to stakeholders’ diverging interests and when making business decisions and thereby work for sustainability.

Textbox 7: Business owners with power to make changes for sustainability
Textbox 8: Running a business more sustainably
Textbox 9: Distributing profit
Textbox 10: Act in accordance with your feelings relating to sustainability
Table 1. Three logics of doing business sustainably

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Logic of self-interest</th>
<th>Logic of conscious consumers’ interests</th>
<th>Logic of stakeholders’ interests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumers</td>
<td>consumers act out of self-interest (in a narrow sense)</td>
<td>consumers demand ‘sustainable’ products</td>
<td>consumers’ behaviour is complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business owners</td>
<td>business owners want to maximise their profits</td>
<td>business owners need to address the demands of conscious consumers</td>
<td>business owners have the power to change towards a more sustainable future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit</td>
<td>a business goal is to maximise profits</td>
<td>working for sustainability is profitable</td>
<td>profit is important but can be distributed differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of a business person (in relation to sustainability issues)</td>
<td>use financial performance indicators to assess whether a business ought to work for sustainability, personal feelings must be put aside = <strong>Adapt to self-interest (in narrow terms):</strong></td>
<td>work for sustainability by meeting the demands of conscious consumers, scope for personal feelings = <strong>Respond to increasing interest for sustainable products</strong></td>
<td>contribute to sustainability and be sensitive to stakeholders’ diverging interests when making business decisions, involvement of personal feelings are necessary = <strong>Be sensitive to stakeholders’ diverging interests</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homo economicus-assumption (self-interest in a narrow sense)</td>
<td>Is taken for real</td>
<td>Is challenged</td>
<td>Is pushed aside</td>
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</table>

In relation to the question whether the ‘homo economicus’-assumption has a ‘productive’ function by creating the assumed behaviour the results above show that when the logic of self-interest comes into play, the assumption (self-interest understood in a narrow sense) is ‘naturalised’ or taken for real, when the logic of conscious consumers comes into play the assumption is challenged by the foregrounding of consumers’ altruistic interests (or self-
interest understood in its broadest sense) and, when the logic of stakeholders’ interests comes into play the assumption is pushed aside.

**Discussion**

The results presented in this paper shows how different aspects of subject matter and/or classroom practices when teaching ‘business education for sustainability’ opened up for different business roles with different interests in focus. Accounts analysis opened up for adapting to *self-interest*, marketing and running a business opened up for responding to conscious *consumers*’ interests for sustainability, and branding and the stakeholder model opened up for being *sensitive* to *stakeholders*’ diverging *interests*.

The detailed empirical examples from educational practice could be useful for lecturers and teachers to identify when and how in educational practice ‘homo economicus’ becomes a norm as well as when and how other norms might emerge. In this way, the results are regarded as analytically generalizable to other business education-contexts.

In relation to the expectation that the integration of sustainability in the business curriculum should make the students better equipped to address these issues, the results illuminate how different assumptions of human behaviour here can hinder (self-interest), facilitate (conscious consumers’ interests) or suggest a route (stakeholders’ interests) for doing business sustainably. In this way, the examples could also be useful as a starting point for reflection of how education, by including a wide range of human motivations, could expand rather than limit the ‘toolbox’ with which sustainability issues could be addressed.

**REFERENCES**


