

# Greening our young people through open schooling – the SEAS way

Professor Erik Knain, Dr. Martin Lee Mueller and Marianne Cutler

**Marianne (MC):** *We've used open schooling approaches for our SEAS programme, but what is meant by open schooling is open to interpretation. What do we mean by open schooling?*

**Erik and Martin (EK/MLM):** In simple terms, we open schools to their local communities, and local school communities to schools. We make learning porous: to experiential, action-oriented, collaborative approaches through, with, and in the community. As we have worked specifically with sustainability as our lens, all our projects involved matters of how to allow learners to breathe sustainability – not just in theory, but in hands-on experience. Not only individually, but collectively. Not merely intellectually, but also artistically. Open schooling, in our approach, opens questions of where, how, and with whom learning for sustainability can happen in the first place. The answers that we co-create between our research community, students, teachers, school leadership, local NGOs, municipalities, decision-makers, artists, businesses, scientists

and other stakeholders will be place-specific, sensitive to context, and tailor-fitted into the lived relationships of real people breathing life into real communities. As such work unfolds, we see that schools unpack and evolve new opportunities to enquire into socio-ecological complexities. We see that the various actors begin to explore, then embody, various articulations of agency.

**MC:** *What are the challenges that open schooling aimed to address? What were the outcomes that we were hoping for?*

**EK/MLM:** We developed our methodological approach toward open schooling as a response not only to the ongoing ecological crisis, but also to a certain parallel crisis in schooling: namely that increasing numbers of children and teenagers have begun expressing deep, existential concerns about possibilities of continued life on this planet, and of questions concerning what it means to thrive inside rampant social and biochemical climates. We started with a certain normative premise, namely that profound

transformations are inevitable. This concerns not only ongoing transformations in the biosphere, but also social transformations, transformations of how we exercise truly sustainable citizenship and, of course, transformations concerning what

it means to prepare our coming generations for a volatile future. As researchers with a deep passion for children, youth, education and school culture, our focus was on how to help schools even begin to develop a language for such transformation. And, through this language, to begin to develop school cultures that integrate and foster possibilities for transformations – whether these are encouraged in the personal, practical, or political spheres.

**MC:** *Feedback from our participating teachers and school leaders is encouraging. What are the benefits that they are finding from engaging with our programme? And what about the benefits for partners?*

**EK/MLM:** A major benefit, it seems, has been the possibility for teachers and for learners to be given spaces in which they can voice their own concerns – long enough, and deeply enough, that their own voices can emerge more clearly. There is such great potential in creating shared spaces for students, teachers and, indeed, out-of-school actors, wherein they might explore the resonances and overlaps and frictions between their various deep concerns, whether they touch on questions of ecological grief, of interdisciplinary teaching approaches to wicked problems, whether they concern possibilities for personal accountability, whether they concern questions of how to mobilise learners or how to give them the insights and strategies necessary to not burn out, or whether they try to come to terms with hard questions of how local actions might possibly contribute to transforming larger and



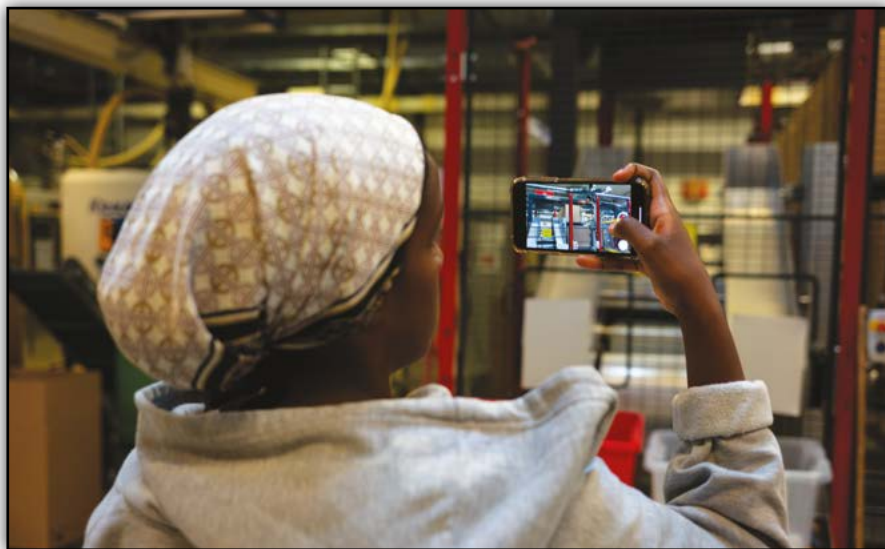
more deeply-held infrastructures of destruction, or life-denying worldviews.

In terms of benefits, there are too many to name here. Some students profess that being given such open, experimental learning spaces allowed them to take risks that they normally don't experience and for which they are not offered a space in more traditional teaching. Other students welcomed possibilities to approach subjects through a multiplicity of lenses, disciplines and approaches, including science proper, hands-on skills, experience in community outreach, music-making and media skills, but also including opportunities to rest slowly, and at length, inside deeper and more existential questions, such as *what is our role as humans inside this commonwealth of aliveness, now that the biosphere appears to be tipping over into a new geological age, aptly named the 'Anthropocene' or the 'Age of Humans'?*

In terms of benefits for partners, there too are many to mention. Partners generally welcome the passion and intensity and energy of young people. Partners generally also welcome the possibility for cross-generational dialogue, and for being able to participate in co-creating experiential learning environments for these children and youth, in which some of these more difficult questions can be given a shape, unfold into narratives and be treated in ways that are less overwhelming, less abstract and generalised, and more relatable.

**MC:** *One of the criticisms of open schooling is that it adds to teachers' already heavy workloads. What has been the impact on teachers' workloads? To what extent did the benefits outweigh these negatives?*

**EK/MLM:** It's a familiar critique indeed, and one that we've encountered often and pondered at length. It is true that the question needs to be addressed



openly and directly, for, when we have done so in our various projects, we have been able to begin treating the question itself as a nourishing ground: how can we create collaborative structures, say, amongst teacher teams already collaborating inside a given school, in which open schooling initiatives need not become an extra burden, but an opportunity for a deeper integration of already ongoing teaching commitments? In other words: how can this real challenge be reinterpreted as opportunity? Again, answers to this very real challenge vary widely. Sensitivity to context is key. It is key to work carefully, and slowly, with grounding open schooling approaches inside real relationships between real people. The qualities of relationships between the various actors turn out to be key. This involves establishing cultures of good dialogue, cultures of listening, cultures that allow for difference, for risk-taking, for healthy boundary-setting, and for voicing concerns. It also involves a sensitivity to the importance of co-ordination between the various actors. In our research community, SEAS, we researchers have generally assumed that mediating role. Open schooling, in our interpretation, builds cultures of co-creation. We have also seen that it matters to develop a set of shared goals within any given tangle of practices and actors, as a unifying focal lens across the range of voices, actors and needs.

Open schooling is not abstractable, in that sense. It is also directly transformative in that sense. For this relational approach to facing sustainability challenges in the context of open schooling embeds the larger societal work towards adaptation inside the concrete, storied adaptation of communities – practically, intellectually, psychologically, morally, emotionally and, indeed, structurally.

**Professor Erik Knain**, Department of Teacher Education and School Research at the University of Oslo.  
**Dr. Martin Lee Mueller**, post-doctoral researcher, philosopher, writer and artist at the University of Oslo.  
**Marianne Cutler**, ASE Director, Curriculum Innovation.

The SEAS programme, led by the University of Oslo with partner organisations in seven countries (including the UK, represented by ASE), has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. For further information about the SEAS programme and open schooling, please visit:  
<https://www.seas.uio.no/> and  
<https://thisisopenschooling.org/>