

Deep Reading – Interviewing the Author TASKS

Academic Reading – Critical Reading

Deep reading can also be referred to as ‘dialogic reading’ – reading as a conversation with the author. This involves reading for deep comprehension of the arguments while questioning the stance and evidence presented by the author. The text itself may provide answers to your questions but sometimes these questions will be left unanswered. You can then critically assess alternatives to the position presented by the author, or through continued research seek responses or perspectives from other writers.

For this activity, you should work with a partner or directly with your ASK Tutor

Task 1 - Read the following text. Choose either the role of **Reader**, the other person will take the role of **Author**.

The Reader will read the text ‘dialogically’. You will prepare a set of questions that examine and question the arguments presented in order to refute or clarify the author’s thinking. (In the following text the author criticises work conducted by Collins. Do you agree with the author’s criticism? On which points would clarification be useful?)

The Author will read the text and prepare to defend or address critical questions posed by the Reader. Your job is to successfully defend or explain the arguments and thinking in the text. Work out: What is your central claim? What are your premises? What evidence are they built on?

How Sustainable is Sustainable Tourism?

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How sustainable is sustainable tourism? Undoubtedly, this is a question developers should ask if they are to truly ensure such global development. A little scepticism is useful in order to prevent them from repeating the mistakes of several decades ago. At that time, tourism

was enthusiastically, but falsely, considered as a panacea for many contemporary global problems. Today, this might be the case with sustainable tourism. Collins expresses such useful scepticism in his article “Tourism Development and Natural Capital” (*Annals* 26:98–109, 1999). This work is pure theoretical exposition, not a practical research study. Thus, in place of a research problem it contains a major theoretic assertion. What needs to be evaluated in such a case is the way this assertion is supported and the logical soundness of the premises and arguments used to prove it.

In his article, Collins asserts that if “an explicit natural capital perspective” (p. 99) is adopted, current sustainable tourism development cannot be considered as genuinely sustainable. He supports this assertion reasonably well. In his arguments, he successfully identifies shortcomings of the concept of carrying capacity as well as some potential spill over effects from sustainable development. At the same time, however, he presents his reasoning in a rather complicated structure and language using mathematical models that are not fully explained. Often the article fails to spell out some underlying assumptions, and explanations are often obscured by social science terms that lack clear definitions.

Any academic writing, whether it falls in the category of a research study or theoretical exposition, should contain an introduction that leads the reader into the subject matter. The introduction should clarify the fundamental theoretical concepts and identify the major issues to be discussed. In this way, when the author states either the research problem of a study or the major assertion of a discourse, the reader would be better able to comprehend it.

However, in the introduction section, Alan Collins provides what might be considered an extremely brief literature review criticizing the lack of explicit delineation of sustainability principles in the existing works. He introduces the purpose and the major assertion of the paper without explaining beforehand the major concepts included: This paper explores the use and abuse of sustainability principles in tourism development from what may be termed an explicit natural capital perspective... [and] leads to the view that the vast majority of STD [sustainable tourism development], as currently espoused (though not necessarily practiced), cannot be genuinely conceived of as sustainable (p. 99).

In a following section that lays out the premises of this argument, the author attempts to explain some of these concepts. The complicated language, however, and the lack of clear examples and incomplete explanation of mathematical models, confuse the readers. At this point, Collins provides the definition of sustainability developed by the World Commission on Environment and

Development (1987): “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 99). In the interpretation of this definition the author acknowledges its broadness, obscurity, and the uncertainty it brings in regard to the needs and values of future generations. He explains that the concept of sustainable development involves both environmental and between generations of both built and natural capital. But the argument fails to clarify the theories used in this interpretation. According to Collins, sustainability implies the need for

modification “of the standard welfare economics “and the “Hicks-Kaldor potential compensation criteria” (p. 99). The one-line explanation of these concepts, however, does not help the reader grasp the idea of what is being modified and how. At this point, a concrete example showing what this change in theoretical principles implies could be very helpful.

Through long and convoluted sentences the reader is led to the idea of “strong sustainability” which, as opposed to weak sustainability, is “clearly associated with environmental protection and ... characterized by a non-declining stock of natural capital over time” (p. 100). What this means is that whatever development activity the contemporary generation undertakes, it should leave the same natural capital for the coming generations. The idea implies that created built capital should not be considered as a compensation for environmental deterioration. Although this statement seems logical, Collins does not make it clear to the reader whether this is the “genuine” sustainability that he talks about in the premise of the argument. Collins, just like the other authors he criticizes earlier, does not clearly specify principles of true sustainability.

Is the principle of strong sustainability the one against which tourism development will be evaluated? Further, is this principle the rationale for adopting a pure natural capital perspective and excluding all other aspects that sustainability involves?

Instead of providing answers to these questions, the author introduces a mathematical equation that is meant to illustrate the strong sustainability principle, which means maintaining constant natural capital per capita over time. This attempt at clarification has some serious shortcomings. First, not all the symbols used in the equation are defined, nor their units of measurement specified. Therefore, understanding this equation is a difficult and time-consuming process for the reader. Second is the problem of concept definition.

Often social science concepts are obscure, have no clear-cut limits and depend on human values. Therefore, they are difficult to define and express in a quantitative form. As already mentioned, this is true for the concept of sustainability.

The concept of natural capital presents the same problems. What is meant by “constant natural capital” (p. 101) and in what units is it measured? How does one measure nature, the change, and damage in it? Nature changes by itself anyway. How would an equation account for this natural change? Change in nature is geographically and historically relative, and it is hard to express it in absolute terms (Butler 1996). One option might be to use the economic value of nature as its measurement. But this is an equally time and place-specific concept. As Butler points out, even natural scientists cannot come up with a legitimate absolute measure of natural capital. If Collins had a workable suggestion, he should provide it in this article, or instead acknowledge the inability to do so. Moreover, in order to ensure the soundness of his reasoning, he should actually spell out what he assumes in this analysis (that natural capital can be objectively measured).

Leaving the reader still confused about the basic concepts in the premise, Collins moves on to lay out his arguments. Now the reader might be tempted to dismiss any further reasoning

because it is developed on the basis of obscure and fluid concepts like “sustainability” and “natural capital”. One should keep in mind, however, that such “fluidity” is inherent in social science. Adopting too critical an approach, the reader might end up dismissing a huge portion of the academic thought in the social sciences. Probably, a better decision would be to avoid the definitional jungle and to go on to consider the arguments on the basis of simple common sense. That said, Collins’s criticism of the concept of tourist carrying capacity sounds legitimate. The question “How many tourists are too many?” or “What is the tourist carrying capacity?” has a time and site-specific answer. It is determined by the environmental characteristics and the preferences of the local people in a given destination. As Collins points out, the level of natural capital deemed adequate for sustainability by current generations may eventually prove insufficient in the future. As a certain destination develops, the ability of the environment to resist change may diminish and thus the carrying capacity level needs to be adjusted accordingly. One way to overcome these problems, as Collins suggests, is to plan for some reserve capacity in advance. Later in the article, Collins uses purely descriptive methods for developing his arguments without trying to make analysis with mathematical models. Because of this approach, the arguments tend to be clearer and more easily understandable. He identifies some of the strategies for sustainable tourism development and appropriately points out that in reality there are problems with their implementation.

For one thing, market incentives for control of the tourist number in an area, such as high fees or subsidies, may encourage new entry of tourism entrepreneurs and thus trigger development beyond the set capacity. Command controls for limiting tourist access, on the other hand, are hard to implement. Therefore, what has started as a designated sustainable destination, may end up not being one. While managing excess capacity, a certain destination might also deflect demand to another tourist area and thus actually “export unsustainable tourism to neighbouring destinations” (p.105).

All these, and other arguments, lead logically to Collins’s assertion that sustainable tourism might not be as sustainable as is currently believed. In the conclusion, he identifies the need for “strategic coordination, planning, and enforcement on a spatially extensive basis, whether community or government-led” (p. 107). He insightfully calls for avoiding a “tourism-centric perspective” (p. 107) when pursuing sustainable development. The author gives the industry the consideration it deserves while at the same time warning against extreme reliance on it. Although Collins’s argument is relatively well developed and logically sound, there are some recommendations he might wish to consider. One would be to achieve overall clarity throughout the paper. This means using simpler sentences, real-life examples, and detailed explanations of any complex concepts. Although style is a matter of personal choice, clarity is not. It is a requirement for any writer. Second, he should reconsider the reasoning methods used in the exposition. It is not necessary to use mathematical models if they cannot actually represent the complex nature of given social science concepts. In such cases, the use of descriptive methods would not discredit the reasoning. Collins deserves much credit for revealing some latent problems with sustainable tourism development. At the same time, however, one should keep in mind that

the author has limited the scope of this paper for the purpose of theory development. All arguments are made in light of pure ecological considerations, when in reality achieving sustainability is a multidimensional process. It involves environmental, economic, sociocultural, and political aspects, among others. Thus, developers have to face challenging questions with no clear-cut answers. Is environmental perfectionism necessary or are actual achievements better than extreme unattained goals? How much preservationist enough? Where is the balance between today and tomorrow?

Butler, R. W. 1996 The Concept of Carrying Capacity for Tourism Destinations: Dead or Merely Buried? *Progress in Tourism and Hospitality Research* 2:283–293.

World Commission on Environment and Development 1987 *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. *Submitted 5 April 2000. Accepted 17 April 2000.*

Reflection:

In what ways did this exercise force you to engage with the author's work?

Authors: What did you **really** think of Velikova's stance