

A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

- Title: Making Sustainability Real: Using a group-enquiry approach in Masters research
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AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone wishing to embed sustainability into Planning courses or engage students with town regeneration.

SUMMARY

This project evaluated, enhanced and disseminated the benefits of drawing together groups of students engaged in Masters research to address the multi-dimensional nature of sustainable development (SD) in practice. The project further developed an approach piloted at QUB Belfast during the 2005-06 academic year, which had focused thesis research of six students on the new fast track Planning M.Sc on identifying initiatives that will help deliver sustainable forms of regeneration for a failing Irish market Town, Clones, in Co. Monaghan.

RATIONALE

The work that took place in Clones, Co. Monaghan appears to have generated a range of cognitive and vocation skills for the students and has illuminated, for both students and the local community, the real benefits that can be derived from an integrated approach to SD. This project embedded SD into the curriculum of an accredited (RTPI, IPI and RICS) one-year Masters in Environmental Planning by engaging a group of students to assist a local regeneration partnership in the development of integrated, sustainable solutions to current economic, social and environmental problems of a small market town in Ireland. The project identified a generic problem – in this case the need for sustainable regeneration initiatives

for the town of Clones – and working with local community representatives, required students to generate their own ideas based on independent research of the causes of urban decay and good practice from elsewhere. During the first year of this approach, students generated initiatives based on micro-generation of renewable energy, the development of a zero-waste strategy, construction skills in traditional building materials, regeneration using cultural assets of the town, slow food and the concept of a book town.

This then generated a range of benefits for student learning, which included:

- The introduction of one-year, intensive Masters courses as the key route to professional accreditation for Town and Country Planning. This has had a number of implications for student learning. As this has reduced opportunities to fully appreciate the multi-dimensional nature of SD and the complex factors governing its implementation, this project uses the opportunity of a thesis, a key element on most of the new Masters courses, to embed skills in the implementation of SD.
- Students engaged in independent individual research. But further developing this approach means the students work on this project in a loose collectivity to address related policy challenges, allowing them on the one hand to develop specialist understanding of a specific policy area (e.g., renewable energy), but critically, as they come together for group discussions, to make links and develop synergies between different issues. This therefore facilitates understanding of one of the key attributes of SD, its integrative nature and potential for win-win solutions.
- Through the application of the rather abstract concept of sustainability to the real and pressing problems of contemporary communities, the module allows students to appreciate how SD is an essential component of local social, economic and environmental issues, as well as the global challenges more usually highlighted in planning literature.
- Students working closely with different community stakeholders from the town, thus fostering additional skills in communication and, importantly, beginning to understand how different sectors appreciate the costs and benefits that accrue from SD.

This project will draw on and enhance a number of current examples of current good practice and engages them for the specific aim of embedding sustainable development in the curriculum. These include the work of the Centre of Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning at the University of Manchester, and others, as well as the wider reflections on ESD, particularly the work of Rolf Jucker, who calls for the need for education of sustainable development to be evidence-based and interdisciplinary.

THE APPROACH

The project undertook the following tasks:

1. Synthesize the literature of ESD and enquiry/problem based learning.
2. Engage in a series of reflective focus groups in with participating and non-participating students.
3. Host a round table discussion with participating community stakeholders to identify benefits and improvements for the project as run in 2005-06.
4. Identify potential projects for the 2006-07 academic year, negotiating with community interests and disseminating this as an option to incoming students.
5. Reflect on the benefits of the project and write these up as a guide to good practice for group enquiry for SD, to be rolled out via the HE Academy's Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE) and QUB channels.
6. Develop reflections into at least two academic papers to be disseminated at conferences.

THE OUTCOMES

- Two conference papers and two academic papers are complete or being completed and the literature review conducted has been used as input into them.
- The focus groups with students that participated in the project in the previous year were conducted. Organisation of the focus group of non-participating students proved difficult (see below). An e-mail survey was completed as an alternative strategy.
- A discussion with community stakeholders from Clones took place in October and November 2006. The data has been assessed and is being written up in detail in academic papers currently being prepared.
- A project similar to the one in Clones was run in Ballynahinch, a small market town 15 miles south of Belfast. This was far more accessible than Clones was, which results in benefits for the students. Due to course changes in QUB's M.Sc Environmental Planning, the new project involved three students from the M.Sc in Spatial Regeneration and one from the M.Sc in Environmental Planning. Three class site visits were undertaken, with students also making individual visits to collect data. Additionally, two roundtable sessions with community interests in the town were held. Students presented their completed work in late September 2007.
- The focus group and interview discussion with those involved in the previous year's project was analysed and led to a number of enhancements in the following year's project. These form key inputs into academic papers. CEBE has expressed interest in funding a good practice guide that will disseminate the experiences gleaned from this project.
- Presentations have been made at two conferences: the UK Planning Research Conferences (Edinburgh, April 2007) and the Academy's ESD conference in Bradford (July 2007). Papers have been submitted to *Environmental Education Research* and *The Journal of Education in Built Environment*.

TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- It was thought that there would be no problems in engaging with non-participating students through a focus group, but the clash with exams and then their graduation did frustrate this process. As an alternative to the focus group, an e-mail survey was conducted and this generated eight good quality responses, which provide an adequate data source for the requirements of the project.
- The project has facilitated better understanding of how experiential learning in ESD can help achieve more grounded understanding of the concept of sustainability, in the context of a vocation course such as Environmental Planning. In this case, the substantial regeneration and sustainability issues faced by Irish market towns are not addressed in the academic or professional literature, yet represent a context in which a majority of Irish planners actually practice and where there is a huge potential for innovation through an SD approach.
- As part of the literature review related to this project, the researchers have become engaged with the concept of “action competence”, which, whilst having resonance in wider environmental education, has had little application in the specific field of planning education. The concept does have value in articulating many of the implicit approaches adopted in planning education and the authors have taken the opportunity of this project to further explore and disseminate its relevance to planning, which in turn will hopefully draw the planning academia a little closer to the environmental education literature.
- Student projects that deal with external “clients” are an extremely useful way to add value in the development of student skills and ensure that the resources of the university are deployed in a way which benefits the wider community and should be seen as part of the underlying ethos of ESD. The relationship with external clients does however tend to take students, academics and community stakeholders out of their comfort zones and the management of the partnership and of expectations are an important element in ensuring the success of such arrangements. This project has facilitated some reflection on good practice in managing University-Community partnerships in the interests of all parties involved and these observations will be included in the practice guide currently being developed for CEBE.
- In the context of a one-year professional Masters in planning, students appear to appreciate the importance and centrality of SD, but do feel that it is too often presented as a background concept rather than centrally informing key aspects of their learning, or indeed, planning practice. The project has justified the need for greater attention on how SD is addressed in these accredited one-year courses and has offered one model that appears to be successful in heightening student competencies in this area, while achieving other benefits.
- In addition to enhancing ESD per se, the group inquiry approach for Masters thesis appears to help some students to develop wider generic, cognitive and

professional skills. It would appear therefore that the approach has relevance outside of the planning field and indeed, outside of the area of ESD.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The presentation in Bradford (July 2007):

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/sustainability/geraint_ellis.pdf

(PDF 3.2MB)

Short article for CEBE's NewsUpdate, p12:

<http://cebe.cf.ac.uk/news/pdf/nu17pdf.pdf> (PDF 2.4MB)