

A Higher Education Academy ESD Resource

- Title: What Makes a Town Sustainable?
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- Partners: Higher Education Academy (Centre for Education in the Built Environment, Economics Network); Cardiff University; Leeds University; South Gloucestershire Council; Sustainable Thornbury; Thornbury and District Museum; Thornbury Town Council; University of Gloucestershire; University of the West of England
- Timing: January 2006 – December 2006
- Funding: £3,000

Keywords: communities, planning, food, transport, schools, consultation

AUDIENCE

This information will be of interest to anyone wishing to link communities and university students within the higher education (HE) curriculum.

SUMMARY

University students/lecturers were matched with a community sustainability initiative. The focus of this work was on Thornbury, a market town just north of Bristol. An economics student from the University of the West of England, a Leeds University PhD student researching participatory methods of consultation, 30 Masters degree students in Planning and Architecture from Cardiff University, and 120 1st-year students in five disciplines from University of Gloucestershire all explored sustainability in Thornbury. Activities included stakeholder events with local residents, and presentations by students to the town. The work of the students fed into Thornbury Town Council's Market Town Healthcheck, while information collected by the Council was used by students as primary data.

RATIONALE

Given the urgency of moving towards sustainability, a partnership approach to supporting communities while at the same time giving students “real life” material for courses or research seemed an ideal project for integrating “campus and community”. Links normally do not readily exist between lecturers/researchers and towns/cities.

THE APPROACH

In January 2006, at a Local Agenda 21 meeting in South Gloucestershire, the sustainability team from the council was approached regarding a suitable project that might appeal to lecturers, students and researchers. Thornbury’s “Market Town Healthcheck” was suggested, as it was still in the early stages of development. After a meeting with the chair of the town Healthcheck and the South Gloucestershire community officer assigned to the exercise, the project was given the green light. They liked the idea that they would, hopefully, be receiving additional data for their own study, in exchange for opening up the data they collect to students.

In March 2006, “cold” e-mails were sent out to HE Academy Subject Centres, interdisciplinary e-mail lists, problem-based learning e-mail lists, and to universities in the region (University of the West of England, University of Bristol, University of Gloucestershire, University of Bath, Cardiff University). The e-mail sent was as follows:

PROJECT OPPORTUNITY: WHAT MAKES A TOWN SUSTAINABLE?

The Higher Education Academy is funding a new interdisciplinary, sustainability project. This may prove a good opportunity for those of you looking for “real life” material for the classroom or for your own action research. Or perhaps you have students that would be interested in this for their own projects.

The idea is to use Problem-Based Learning to help South Gloucestershire Council determine what would make a market town “sustainable”, measure the actual sustainability of a market town (in this pilot case, Thornbury, just north of Bristol), then move the town in that direction. (Sustainability in their context refers to the economy, the environment, social issues and transportation.) The Council’s time scale is one year, but we are open to extending that.

Those of you (or your students) in this region of the country (UWE, Bristol, Bath, Cardiff, Gloucester) would be welcome to attend meetings (free lunch!) and to participate at any level. Within the year, we may also have funding to buy out the time of some lecturers so that course materials could be developed from this case study.

If you live outside this region, we are still eager for you to join us via e-mail, as we are also piloting various ways of working with others effectively, albeit electronically. And, again, you would be encouraged to include students, and to use the study for your own purposes.

A “moodle” site was set up for discussion and collation of materials.

THE OUTCOMES

To kick things off, a Sustainability Café was held for academics and community group members in April 2006 to discuss what a sustainable community would look like. (See below for link to associated paper.) Then, in the summer, students, lecturers and researchers began looking at issues of sustainability in Thornbury. (Sustainability in this context referred to economic vitality, environmental health, social cohesion and transportation, as these were the categories of the Market Town Healthcheck.)

University of the West of England

Funded separately by the Economics Network, a recently-graduated economics student, Donna Humphrey, used *Ecological Economics: A Workbook for Problem-Based Learning* to explore food sustainability. Her work will be the basis of an Economics Network workshop in Birmingham in April 2008. She was found via the Economics Network's contacts at the University of the West of England when they were asked if any students might be interested in the project.

Leeds University

Ricardo Vieira, a PhD student researching participatory consultation methods, has based his work in Thornbury. He handed out disposable cameras to several residents and invited them to take photographs of aspects of Thornbury they both like and dislike. Once the pictures were developed, he interviewed the photographers to gain insight into their views of Thornbury: past, present and future. The photographs, along with the comments, were displayed at Thornbury and District Museum over three months. The next steps in Ricardo's project were: 1) to meet with "experts" in the fields revealed by residents to be of concern, 2) take the "expert" views back to the residents for comment, 3) repeat this process.

The projected outcomes are: 1) a report to relevant official bodies and advisory committees assessing some of the future options for Thornbury's development in a particular area of concern chosen by residents and the Town Council, 2) a manual with a description of the deliberative method followed, and 3) an evaluation report reviewing participants' assessment of methodology for further rounds of future planning processes. The project is expected to be complete in September 2008. Ricardo discovered the Thornbury project via the cold e-mails and Heather placed Ricardo in contact with relevant people in Thornbury.

Cardiff University

Under the guidance of lecturers Julie Gwilliam, Francesca Sartorio, and Paola Sassi, 30 postgraduate students in planning and architecture consulted with Thornbury residents over a weekend in October 2006. Out of this, three groups formed to tackle the following issues of concern: 1) Is there a place for new,

affordable housing near the railway link beside the quarry? How feasible would it be to open the line again and provide a Park and Ride facility? 2) Why is the Industrial Estate in Thornbury such a blind spot? How energy efficient are the businesses and what employee needs are not being met? And is there scope for renewable energy generation there? 3) How can primary school children in Thornbury better integrate with the wider community and start teaching residents about being 'greener'? The groups presented their preliminary findings to the town in December 2006. Several of the students are following up on the projects for individual assignments. Thornbury Town Council is following the recommendations made regarding the Industrial Estate.

One subsection, architectural design students, ran an additional series of consultation events with residents in early 2007 to focus on a design plan that would be useful for the community. Ideas had included a new performing arts venue, the re-vamping of Thornbury Hospital, and a food production/consumption infrastructure. The chosen idea (the performing arts venue) was presented for feedback and the final feasibility study was unveiled in May 2007 to the town.

One Cardiff student, not involved in the above projects, is comparing two streets in Thornbury for her dissertation. She will look at houses in the Conservation Area versus houses on a different Thornbury street, and analyze the different restrictions on making them energy efficient.

Another student, a research assistant in psychology, will be conducting interviews with residents on "Living with Risk" in the town (which is situated near Oldbury Power Station) for her PhD thesis.

The Cardiff University contacts were found via the Higher Education Academy's Centre for Education in the Built Environment, who circulated the e-mail to Cardiff departments. Additional students became involved through the active lecturers.

University of Gloucestershire

One hundred and twenty 1st year students from five disciplines who were taking a skills module were introduced to the theme of sustainability. As part of their programme of events, they have: 1) been in the audience for a special "Sustainability Question Time" with a panel consisting of Martin Horwood, Liberal Democrats Shadow Minister for the Environment and MP for Cheltenham; Alex Steele, Chairman of the Gloucestershire Environmental Business Forum, Director of the Gloucestershire Green Business Club, and Sustainability Advisor to Gloucestershire; and Heather Witham, founder and member of Sustainable Thornbury; and 2) visited Thornbury in three batches to meet with members of Sustainable Thornbury about their motivation and concerns.

Three of the lecturers involved in the module, Sue Swansborough, Dave Turner, and Kenny Lynch, wrote about their experience in a chapter for the university's book, *Greener by Degrees*. The project was showcased in January 2007 as part of an HEI networking event co-hosted by the Higher Education Academy. The event also included hearing from residents of St. Paul (a Cheltenham neighbourhood interested in regeneration) and Bisley (a village south of Stroud) with the aim of creating new project opportunities for staff and students at the university.

Note: Despite 27 people joining the "moodle" site, the site was not well used. Questions about sustainability were posed, issues raised regarding Thornbury's healthcheck, yet few engaged.

TAKING IT FURTHER: LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- Involvement with a community outside a university may need one key person to remain engaged and active with the lecturers/students. In this case, the Project Lead also resided in Thornbury, so was able to find the necessary venues and contacts.
- Academic pressures make it difficult to ensure community/council initiatives coincided with term times. Unless the lecturers are able to begin working with the community/council at least a year before the students become involved, perhaps it is easier for a resource-constrained community group to be approached about activities/projects that are on the back burner. This way, the academics/students are helping move a project forward that otherwise would not be progressing. In the Thornbury case, the Council already had its own timetable before the academics became involved and so problems arose in integrating the two.
- An idea that may help with the above two situations would be a clearinghouse, based at a university or within a county/city, that would hold information on community groups seeking assistance and council initiatives that may be of interest to academics and students. When a lecturer or researcher is looking for a "live" project, s/he need only consult the database to find information on opportunities. The database could be editable by the participants to keep it up-to-date.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A full description of the Sustainability Café event:

http://www.bris.ac.uk/ias/int-events/witham_cafe_summary

The *Greener by Degrees* chapter with information on the Thornbury project:

<http://www2.glos.ac.uk/offload/ceal/resources/B2.pdf>