

Title - Engaging first-year students in sustainable development issues

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Group - The course is an optional module, one that is designated as being of special interest, in the first year for a number of courses. Students taking it include those doing studying tourism and arts and leisure management, and those on wider business studies courses.

Activity - This example describes a first year module – Business in Society (Leisure and Tourism) which originally arose out of the work and interests of a member of staff who was associated with Tourism Concern, an NGO that campaigns for sustainable and responsible tourism. It was felt that a broad basic understanding of the notion of sustainability, and the need for different stakeholder points of view to be understood, would be of benefit to students on a wide number of courses concerned with business, tourism, and related issues.

Aim - The overall aim of the module is to equip students with an understanding of sustainability as it relates to business in general, and to the business of leisure, tourism and hospitality. The module aims to:

- Introduce students to the context and principles of sustainable development
- Examine how these principles relate to today's world, and to the world of business
- Introduce concepts of development, growth and change within a global context
- Explore issues of politics, power and responsibility in business

Context / Background - As above, work with Tourism Concern prompted the decision to offer this module. There was also a case for new courses when the old University of North London merged with Guildhall University to form the London Metropolitan University. The course ran for the first time in the academic year 2002/03.

Example

Taught elements

The course consists of twelve lectures of 1.5 hours each, and 12 seminars of the same length, followed by three weeks with seminars only and individual consultations for students. The first and last lectures are Introduction and Overview. The weekly topics are:

- Problems of sustainability
- Introduction to sustainable development
- Power and the role of the media
- Global and local business/international trade mechanisms
- Sustainable development and the public sector
- Sustainable development and consultation
- Individual human rights and stakeholder responsibilities
- Corporate social responsibility
- Sustainable tourism

A number of the lecturers are given by visiting lecturers. These have included representatives of Shell, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Islington Borough, Tourism Concern, and others who have an expertise in a particular topic. Often the visitors bring multimedia presentations. Attempts are made to have all sectors represented; it is important on a course of this nature that the students start to understand the very different backgrounds and perspectives of the different players and the reason why it is important to understand the different cases that they are presenting.

Seminar work includes group work, individual work, discussion and role-play games, which are particularly well-suited to this type of course. At the outset, though, students are encouraged to develop their skills in the reading of serious newspapers, by analysing what can be found, where, in the different newspapers, and trying to teach the students to see what the main points are and not to be misled by the 'embroidery'.

There is a bibliography which is based around a course reader provided by the University. This is necessary because a) there are insufficient library books for such a large module, and b) we have a large number of part-time students who are greatly helped by having course material in a pack.

Assessment

The assessment method being used is a portfolio. Each student is required to find, analyse and document one serious newspaper article relating to each week's topic. This is presented in a 'scrapbook' with the article on one side of the pair of pages and the commentary, of around 250-300 words per topic, on the opposite page. An introduction and overview is required to set the scrapbook in context.

The assessment criteria are based around:

- a) suitability of each article
- b) overall selection of articles
- c) links made with weekly topics
- d) quality of summary
- e) quality of analysis
- f) evidence of background reading, and using the context to explain the issues in the article

Results / Feedback - The reactions to this course have varied wildly. It is only in its third year and modifications are continually made to try to take account of what has, and has not worked. Basically, the student reaction can be divided into four quite distinct groups:

Students who already have an interest in the type of matters studied – for example, they may have been involved in human rights issues, etc. These students seem to welcome the chance to read more around their interests and, in particular, to encounter visiting speakers with a particular field of expertise – even if the view expressed is the opposite of their own (as for example the meeting of Nigerian students with a representative of Shell Oil). These students tend to produce very thoughtful portfolios.

Students who have felt slightly suspicious of “how the world goes round” – these students are often delighted to be provided with the material and background to help them explore the issues. The university has a very large proportion of students from ethnic minority groups which means that it is possible to have very stimulating discussions and arguments on topics relating to ethics and corporate social responsibility, for example, as there is a lot of experience in the room. These students enjoy the course, but may not yet be in a position to produce such high quality analysis as the first group. For a lot of them, reading complex language is quite an effort and this is something that the course team tries to help them with. Very positive comments have been received from this group of students, along the lines of “I never thought I would be able to read a serious newspaper – and before this course I didn’t realise it had anything to do with me, but now I love it”.

Students who find it difficult or impossible to work up any real interest (this probably also applies in other subjects). They simply sit at the back, don’t join in the discussions, and don’t do very much at all. Their portfolios are superficial or part-plagiarised, and they are likely to fail.

Students who resent doing these topics at all – this group cannot see how the course relates to the rest of their studies, or how it will help them to earn a living. Each year there is a handful of this type, only turning up intermittently and tending to submit a portfolio that, if not illiterate or plagiarised, is pretty inadequate. They get cross when discovered (plagiarising with Internet downloads). Fortunately there are not many students in this category.

This course is not easy to teach because it is difficult to find non-partisan material which is written in a language accessible to first-year students who arrive without a global overview of the topics. Furthermore, there is a lot of basic economics and sociology to be introduced, as well as basic environmental topics. Nothing can be taken for granted. Sometimes it feels that the course is too basic for some of students; at others, it is clearly that they are wildly out of their depth. The course gets refined gradually each year – although it seems unlikely that its approach will ever be set in stone or even on permanent Powerpoint presentations!

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