Chapter 8 Sustainability in practice: Action learning and the Green Impact initiative
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Edited by Richard Atfield and Patsy Kemp
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Summary

This chapter presents an overview of the experience of 30 undergraduates in their second year of the International Business Strategy degree at Anglia Ruskin University working as eco-auditors for the Green Impact Initiative; a pro-environmental behavioural programme co-ordinated by the National Union of Students (NUS). The originality of the case study lies in its articulation of the practical experience of students working as university campus eco-auditors, and in the academic context of the coursework for International Business and Environmental Management. The chapter also includes some ideas regarding the use of art-based methodologies and aesthetics in the promotion of systems thinking, critical thinking and self-reflection among the participants: students, academics and environmental officers.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom (UK) have been embracing the idea of education for sustainable development (ESD) since 2001, alongside a trend in universities across the world (Leal-Filho, 2009), and driven by increasing climate change regulation in the UK (HEFCE, 2010). While universities across the country are establishing environmental management systems to identify and manage their significant environmental impacts, very few initiatives have linked these programmes to changes in the curriculum. The experience of a number of universities has demonstrated that students can contribute to and benefit from the processes of greening the campus, through audits and other participatory schemes (Sharp, 2002). However, the link between the administrative and the academic realms had not been fully developed previously, and the option of curriculum changes concurrent with ‘greening the campus’ initiatives had not been tested. This runs against the overwhelming evidence from papers and expert publications about the necessity of changing pedagogical strategies in which students are passive recipients of information to a more participatory, engaging, and exciting approach in which they are committed to making changes towards sustainable development (Shrivastava, 2010).

Objectives

The question of how to improve the teaching and learning activities of the module (Environmental Management and Sustainability) to promote practical engagement of students with environmental practices was the starting point for this activity. The following aspects were included in discussion:

- to review, at an international level, experience of students’ practical engagement and greening of the campus;
- to analyse the experience of Anglia Ruskin University students working as eco-auditors of the campus in a way that is linked to the curriculum, in particular, by the use of visuality and art-based methodologies used in teaching and supporting the module;
- to explore the challenges, difficulties and potentialities of this type of programme and its possible adoption by other universities.

Rationale

This chapter draws on three main ideas from the ESD literature. Firstly, it shares the necessity of addressing the obstacles to ESD in HEIs with regard to inter-disciplinarity and student engagement (Lozano, 2006). Secondly, it develops some ideas concerning the use of arts and visuality in management teaching, applied to the field of sustainability and environmental management (Page and Gaggiotti, 2012). Thirdly, it expands on the recommendations made by scholars to develop practical skills in sustainability and environmental issues (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).
Context

Students increasingly think that sustainability and environmental issues are key aspects for their professional futures (Bone and Agombar, 2011). We can consider this with results from previous research on student perceptions of sustainability (Stir, 2006), which demonstrated that universities needed to respond to changing demands from students over what they considered to be important for their educational experience and graduate attributes. HEIs are now increasingly committed and driven to reduce their carbon footprint and to implement policies on sustainability (HEFCE, 2010). In this chapter, when we refer to ‘sustainability in management education’ we mean the life-long learning process of embedding practices and discussing ideas around the social, economic, cultural and environmental impact that key actors, such as students, lecturers and practitioners, will make in the transformation of current practices and lifestyles. Particularly, we argue that education for sustainability in the context of management studies needs to include ideas and methodologies linked to systems thinking, creativity and co-operation. This is an ongoing process that may emphasise some areas of sustainability over others at certain times; nevertheless, it is important to view sustainability as a pathway rather than an end.

Description

Sustainability in higher education

The implementation of programmes on environmental management in HEIs has been limited mainly to programmes for ‘greening the campus’ with very few attempts at linking these programmes with curriculum and academic practice. In business schools the consideration of ESD often involves “minor amendments to a typical curriculum pattern of providing grounding in core knowledge, across a wide variety of domains, through relatively traditional teaching methods” (Hopkinson and James, 2010: 366). As documented by Lozano (2006), issues in the particular organisational culture of HEIs, such as lack of interaction and distrust around interdisciplinary dynamics, can create barriers to the adoption of ESD programmes.

Sustainability has become an important aspect in Anglia Ruskin University’s current corporate plan (2012-2014). The university has considered some of the main ideas inherited from environmental sustainability while adding social, cultural and economic dimensions to this complex concept. In this regard, and responding to the increasing importance of sustainability in management studies, some modules at the Lord Ashcroft Business School have been created to address issues of sustainability as environmental management. One of these modules is the optional course on International Environmental Management and Sustainability (IEMS). This is a second-year module which started in 2008 and is open to business and management students. Initially, the module took a very general approach to issues on environmental policies, regulations and some basic ideas in relation to businesses. During the four years of running the module, the content and delivery strategy changed radically. Early on, we realised sustainability was not perceived by the students as a key aspect of their personal and professional future: a survey in 2009 completed by 42 third-year business and management students demonstrated a lack of awareness of what sustainability means; neither did they know what the university was doing about it. To deal with this situation, we proposed a new form of module assessment in which the students would plan an environmental management strategy to reduce their own carbon footprint. Students could choose from different actions, such as energy saving, water use, travel and recycling. An average of £20-£30 is saved by the students in the ten weeks of programme implementation. There are also many other examples of changing lifestyle, for example in travel arrangements - many students from international backgrounds who use the car for short distances reported on savings in petrol and parking costs. Most importantly, students continued to implement their environmentally friendly activities after the module: there is evidence of them saving money, and some report that the module opened their eyes and they actually enjoy being ‘green’!

Figure 1: Timeline for Anglia Ruskin University’s involvement with sustainability.

- 2009 – Achieved ISO 14001 certification in 18 months.
- 2009 – First year of Green Impact and collaboration of students as eco-auditors.
- 2009 – First class Award in the People and Planet Green League.
- 2009 – Student’s Union achieve Silver Sound Impact Award.
- 2009 – Achieved the Carbon Trust standard.
- 2010 – Second year of Green Impact and collaboration of students as eco-auditors.
- 2010 – First class Award in the People and Planet Green League.
- 2010 – Students Union achieves Silver Sound Impact Award.
- 2011 – Third year of Green Impact and collaboration of students as eco-auditors.
- 2011 – First class Award in the People and Planet Green League.
- 2011 – Students Union achieves Silver Sound Impact Award.
2011 – Creation of the Global Sustainability Research Institute at Anglia Ruskin University and appointment of Education for Sustainability Director.
2012 – Sustainability becomes a key objective in the Corporate Plan and the Learning and Teaching Strategy of Anglia Ruskin University.
2012 – Fourth year of Green Impact and collaboration of students as eco-auditors.
2012 – First class Award in the People and Planet Green League.

**Green Impact**

In 2010, the opportunity to link the academic practice of the module with the campus environmental strategy emerged through the implementation of the Green Impact scheme. Green Impact is an environment accreditation scheme for staff coordinated by the NUS in partnership with the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC). It is currently implemented at 46 higher education institutions in the UK. In 2010-11 the scheme was delivered in 600 departments, reaching over 36,000 staff. The scheme encourages pro-environmental behaviours among staff by empowering champions to make changes to their everyday work practices and gain recognition for their environmental efforts, while playing on the competitive spirit of staff working in teams. Teams receive a workbook which breaks down the more complex environmental issues into more manageable sections to work through; at the end of the process the team’s efforts are audited by students who monitor their actions. The programme usually involves recruiting student volunteers to become auditors through a university’s student union, giving them half a day’s training with a certificate on completion. At Anglia Ruskin University an alternative route was taken: instead of opting for an open recruitment, it was suggested that the students of the IEMS module be invited to participate voluntarily in this programme as eco-auditors and their work assessed as part of the assignment. The main advantage of this approach is students integrate what they are learning in class with practical experience. For instance, issues such as ‘organisational change and resistance’ are common topics when evaluating the implementation of both the Green Impact and the individual activities of energy saving at home. For the staff members audited, this also provided a good opportunity to meet the students in a different type of relationship.

**Fun, art and aesthetics in education for sustainability**

The continual development of the module in terms of content and delivery also prompted new changes towards specific aspects of environmental management systems, the design of photography workshops to support the gathering of evidence (useful both at the household level and campus) and the implementation of workshops and training in communication and climate change (supported by fellow researchers at the Global Sustainability Institute). In particular, the module relied on a number of art-based methodologies including the use of films, the delivery of workshops on photography and drawing, and the inclusion of activities outside the classroom, such as visits to the botanical gardens and evaluation of the services provided by an adjacent green area (an old Victorian graveyard, home to a number of trees, birds and a rare species of butterfly found in east Cambridge).

The use of art-based methodologies in management teaching has a relatively short history and includes the use of theatre and plays to teach leadership, the connection between music direction and strategic management, and the use of films to illustrate a number of organisational conflicts and situations in contemporary settings. In our experience, and based on a theoretical framework which demonstrates four key elements in the creativity process, the use of art-based techniques and aesthetic approaches has proved a suitable avenue for the development of skills in these areas: the ‘illustration of essence’, projective techniques, skills transfer and ‘making’ an artwork (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009).

In the first area, ‘illustration of essence’, art-based methods enhance the participants’ understanding of a concept or idea. For example, films illustrate important issues surrounding climate change or consumption problems in a graphic and dynamic way. The module presented films such as *The Age of the Stupid* (2009), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), and *The End of the Line* (2009) in order to promote discussion on climate change and resource depletion. The use of films in the classroom takes considerable effort from the lecturer; it is vital to prepare in advance extra information such as definitions, political issues, further readings, and selected web pages for additional consultation.

Secondly, drawings were used as a ‘projective technique’ where “the output of artistic endeavours allows participants to reveal inner thoughts and feelings that may not be accessible through more conventional development modes” (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009: 58). For instance, in the first session of the module, students are encouraged to ‘write’ about what sustainability is and then they have to ‘draw’ the same thing. Invariably, the written definition tends to replicate and use standard words, whereas the drawings reveal a different approach. In the following example it is possible to appreciate the difference between the rhetoric and the practice.
“Charity begins at home, your home. You can help save our beautiful planet by reducing your carbon footprint then join the campaign and persuade others, for the sake of our children, our children’s children and the generations after them.” (Student, July 2012)

Compared with:

**Figure 2. Using art to express concepts of sustainability**

| Environment what? I need to keep myself warm… I like to keep my house warm all the time. I am not going to get in that cold car… wait for it to warm up let it steam for 30 minutes…”. |

This exercise also evidences the limitations of asking traditional questions, which elicit traditional responses. These do not always show the real engagement of the participants with the values and implications of sustainability and environmentalism. By tapping into alternative methodologies such as drawing and visualisation, such divergences are easily evidenced, producing a different type of data (Warren and Vince, 2012).

In the third area, skills transfer, art can be used in diagnosing environmentally significant aspects of a situation. For example, the students participated in a photography workshop in order to complement their diagnosis of environmental problems and eco-mapping© (Engel, 2002). Based on the ideas developed in the eco-mapping tool, students had to draw a map of the premises audited, identifying environmentally significant aspects such as radiators, light bulbs, appliances and computers. They were encouraged to use pictures and maps of the university teams audited, providing evidence about the implementation of the Green Impact and its auditing.

Fourthly, the making of an artwork. As part of a visual training for environmental diagnosis, the students were encouraged to ‘draw without seeing the paper’ and to draw with the opposite hand from the one they normally use. This exercise is inspired by Edward’s method of drawing with the right side of the brain (Edwards, 2001). It is aimed at breaking the process of ‘thinking’ what you see, and replacing this with ‘what you actually see’. It helps students to relax and get into the exercise. It is very important to offer a strong support when suggesting this exercise and explain the rationale behind it otherwise the students may consider it a ‘childish’ activity. A good starting point for this exercise is the literature on arts and business (Adler, 2006).

**Results**

To date 30 students have trained as eco-auditors and over the three years we have had an average of 12 teams a year involving over 200 members of staff.

Approximately 110 students have taken this module since 2008. In 2009 a Facebook page was created by the lecturer in order to share information on the module and this has become an interesting forum in which participants share ideas. For example, former students share their experiences and post pictures or links with associated topics, helping new students to understand the dynamic of the module. It has become a tradition that a member of the previous group of eco-auditors will co-ordinate the following cohort of students. This work is voluntary and benefits the lecturer, since co-ordinating student activity with the
environmental office can be time-consuming. For the volunteer student it is a great experience of leadership and prestige and for the new students it is a way of getting peer mentor support for their work, in other words, it is educational sustainability.

The approach taken to student engagement with Green Impact at Anglia has been praised by the NUS as ‘good practice’ and, to our knowledge, it is the only initiative of its kind that links the work of the students in Green Impact with the curriculum. It is our understanding that while some other universities have attempted to do this in the context of a module, it has not been a sustained activity.

The work of students working as both facilitators of change and eco-auditors has great potential. In 2011, four students (who worked as eco-auditors of the Green Impact at the university level) evaluated the possibility of applying the Green Impact in three organisations linked to the motor racing industry, and this formed part of their dissertation. The students benefited from furthering their knowledge and research by using Green Impact as a case study, analysing issues such as environmental management, organisational change, and systems thinking. One innovative feature of this experiment was the fact that all of them worked together as a team, even though they had to produce individual dissertations. They shared articles, literature and experiences, as well as their anxieties and problems. As expressed in the evaluation:

“It was great to work all together to implement the Green Impact and to learn about the difficulties of people and organisations, because it is one thing to talk about resistance to change, and it is something else to see how people really dislike changes.” (Souvenir Oyawale, February 2012)

Currently, a pilot aimed at testing the relevance of the Green Impact in 12 organisations of the third sector is taking place. In this, students will both facilitate implementation and eco-audit the organisation’s performance; we will test the potential expansion of this type of activity beyond the campus.

Evaluation

We argue here that the university environmental strategy represents an ideal context in which students can gain first-hand experience of how environmental management is implemented in practice. This intervention has shown how students’ engagement with environmental management processes in universities brings fresh knowledge and enthusiasm to the implementation of these initiatives among staff members and other stakeholders (Ferreira et al, 2006). For the students this is an opportunity to go beyond the classroom and learn a practical skill with implications for their future employment:

“I actually learned something practical instead of just reading books and it is also good for my CV. It’s like a professional job.” (Video-recorded interview with Aaron Yang, China, 2010)

For some students this was also an opportunity to subvert the power dynamics between staff members and the students:

“I had to audit my own lecturer, and this was a bit funny. The team was actually more nervous than me: they showed me around showing me the evidence. I felt very professional.” (Interview with Haider Shukhaer, 2010)

Some students are pursuing careers or further education in the area of environmental management. As mentioned above, former participants have also taken the role of co-ordinators for the upcoming group of students. These positions are not always paid and the students work voluntarily to gain further experience and skills. The student bridges the generational and power gap between the lecturer and students:

“Having students telling us what [Green Impact] is about is much better because one can see from their experience, which is similar to ours, what the benefits are and how difficult this can be.” (Ghaith Khabaz, Green Impact evaluation, May 2012)

Interviews with students and stakeholders have demonstrated the success of this experience: students increase their skills and many of them have continued working as peer mentors or have adapted Green Impact in their own organisations when returning home from university. At the same time, the students have declared this is a professional experience for them that tests not only their eco-auditing skills but also their communication and professional skills, while integrating additional disciplines and learning, such as organisational change, operational research and marketing. Most importantly, as one of the students said: “This is a life-changing opportunity, opening new horizons.” (Student Haaziq Abdul, by email 7 February 2012)
Conclusions

We have extracted the following learning points from this experience.

There is a gap in the educational 'market' regarding practical ways of learning. Although there are many internship programmes, these normally apply to newly graduated students or those in their last year. We know this type of programme is difficult to implement because it requires the participation of different stakeholders and the inter-connection of faculties and departments (Lozano, 2006). However, our experience shows it is possible to take the university context and treat it as an extended classroom in which to explore in practice the many issues surrounding organisational studies, change, environmental management and sustainability.

Collaboration is not devoid of problems; there are traditional separations between administrative staff and academics, and also between student unions and academic directives. To deal with these differences it is important to increase the visibility of this type of project by using internal communications, engaging with university staff such as the employment office, the research and development group, the students' union and student-led initiatives on social responsibility. The more people are involved in these types of experience, the more accepted they become. In our experience it is worth trying collaborations such as this, using very concrete topics and encouraging tangible results, as the purpose of achieving education for sustainability seems to overcome some deep-seated differences.

We would also like to draw attention to the experimental approach we took with the testing of different ideas; for instance, the inclusion of art-based methodologies started as a tentative idea but became the backbone of the pedagogical strategy for sustainability. There are a number of well tested techniques and examples of using art and aesthetics to illustrate certain aspects of organisational studies, as well as a plentiful number of films, exhibitions, poetry, music and computer games based on areas such as climate change and sustainability. This aspect of 'fun' in teaching and learning is a key component of this strategy, which is developed through the active participation of students.

As mentioned before, peer mentoring and peer learning are the "secrets for success" of these experiences, and this chapter shows how social networks, tutoring, student co-ordination and student union participation can be articulated in a creative way with the aim of education for sustainability.

The most successful aspect of the experience has been the fact that students see other students co-ordinating the group, and at the end of each semester, students compete to become the student co-ordinator for the new cohort. There are no formal contracts involved in taking on this job, however, many of the students working voluntarily in this role have progressed to become research assistants funded by the LAIBS in Summer placements, and most importantly, this very important experience contributes to their employability.

The main aim of this type of project is to empower individuals to take on a leading role in the changing of habits and to engage politically with sustainable development and social responsibility. The university provides a friendly and supportive context for trying out and testing this aim. Although many of these ideas may be viewed with caution by more traditional lecturers since they represent a radical change in the usual power structures of the classroom, the benefits and the satisfaction for all involved are worth the risk.

We repeat, the key here is visibility and sharing the experience with different stakeholders. What we show here is not a 'recipe for success', indeed, this is only one experience that may or may not be replicable in other settings. Our invitation to you is to take risks, to be playful and adventurous with new collaborations, breaking the traditional barriers between students, lecturers and administrators, to share your experiences, and to appreciate that education for sustainability is a big aim that requires all of our enthusiasm and creativity!

References and URLs


Biography

BEATRIZ ACEVEDO works as a senior lecturer in sustainable management at the Lord Ashcroft Business School, Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. She combines her academic work with her artistic practice as a painter. She has considerable experience in research and academic consultancy on processes of social and sustainable development in Latin America. Dr Acevedo’s research concerns processes of organisational change; she is currently working on the intersections between aesthetics, visuality and sustainability in the context of higher education and business studies.

SARAH JOHNSON has a first-class honours degree in Environmental Science from the University of Plymouth. She works as the Environment and Utilities Officer at Anglia Ruskin University, covering all aspects of environmental management ranging from working on travel plans, to biodiversity issues to waste, energy and behaviour change, and fair-trade issues. Sarah has a passion for sustainability that continues into her personal life in which she has volunteered in South America and enjoys working on her allotment.

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