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Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) across the HE Curriculum

Abstract

With growing concerns over the environment, more attention is being paid to sustainability, including its social and economic dimensions. Government and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) are supportive of, and forward-thinking employers are looking to universities to prepare students with, knowledge, skills and attitudes that will contribute to sustainability. ESD features in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy for Anglia Ruskin. Those working on developing education for sustainable development see this as best done not in specialist modules, but by integration into every aspect of the curriculum. Several colleagues are already including a sustainability aspect in their teaching. A few of these, from different Faculties, gave short presentations at the conference on how they are doing this and summaries of their presentations are provided. Workshop participants then had a lively discussion of the issues raised by the case studies. It was agreed to set up an ESD network open to anyone at Anglia Ruskin University. Those wishing to join should contact Nigel Cooper.

Keywords

ESD, sustainability, integration
What is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)?
(Nigel Cooper, University Chaplain, Cambridge)

It may appear that many students and staff pay little attention to the almost apocalyptic warnings of environmental disaster that surround us? It seems to me that many of our younger students feel both so scared and so un-response-able, that they give the impression of hiding their heads in the sand.

As a university we have a responsibility to help them face the future and act accordingly. As a Zen friend puts it over meditation, it is to look calmly and steadily into the abyss. But, in our case, to follow analysis with wise action.

We are in the UNESCO decade of education for sustainable development. They define it thus:

"Education for sustainable development aims to help people to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future, and to act upon these decisions."

(http://www.unesco.org/en/education/esd/)

First we need to help them attain an attitude that can face the future and its radical uncertainties. Then enable them with skills and knowledge to make good decisions. And lastly motivate them so that they can act to make the difference needed.

There is a schism in ESD between pragmatists and idealists. Steven Sterling calls these conceptions A and B (Universities that Count report, 2009).

For ‘A’, ESD is an important addition to the curriculum. It is about training technologists, from those in engineering to human behaviour. It is about enhancing employability in a rapidly changing world. And its focus is on knowledge, skills and attitudes.

ESD in ‘B’ involves a recasting of the curriculum, conceiving education as the formation of global citizens who practise awareness and reflection and who are prepared for the unknowns. Here the focus is on creativity, critical thinking and flexibility.

You may be attracted more to one than another. These conceptions may provide a grid with which to place the examples that follow. I hope both conceptions will find eager and skilled practitioners.

Higher Skills at Work and ESD
(Dr Alison Greig, Learning Development Services, Skills Development Consultant)

The Higher Skills at Work Initiative is funded by HEFCE as part of its agenda to encourage the university sector to become more responsive to the needs of businesses and organisations and hence become more accountable and sustainable as a public sector service. Specifically we are interested in how we can meet these needs through degree and postgraduate level learning. The two most common requests are for employees to be provided with the most up to date knowledge in their particular specialism and for generic or ‘soft’ skills to allow them to apply their knowledge, skills and experience more effectively in the workplace. However, there is commonly a discontinuity between the perceived HE skills needs and business goals. ESD is an opportunity to help Anglia Ruskin to align more closely and directly with businesses goals.

Education as sustainable development is a ‘way of thinking’ which provides the range of soft/generic skills that businesses require to respond to risks and challenges and, equally as importantly, empowers staff with the attitude to want to do so. Education about sustainable development facilitates the development of thought leadership, again crucial in a changing business landscape. Thirdly, and most simply, education for sustainable development will provide a new generation of employees with the knowledge, skills and behaviours which the emerging low carbon business world requires.
Learning by Doing: Some Ideas Regarding Pedagogy of Sustainability
(Dr. Beatriz Acevedo, Lecturer in Sustainable Development, Lord Ashcroft International Business School (LAIBS))

Education for sustainable development should not be considered a fashion or a fad. This condition is even more pertinent when discussing the wider issues concerning sustainability and the role of universities (Morin, 1999). After all, as David Orr has argued, environmental problems are not the work of ignorant people, ‘rather, it is largely the result of work by people with BA's, BSc's, LLB's, MBA's and PhD's’ (Orr, 1995, p. 7).

However, the question is ‘how to do it’. I will describe my experience regarding the module on International Environmental Management and Sustainability at the LAIBS. My original quest was ‘how to encourage ownership and passion amongst the students in relation to sustainability and environmental management?’

Apart from the lectures, guest speakers and art-based exercises, the assignment was modified by offering two possibilities: firstly, to change practices toward energy saving in their own households, and secondly, by becoming eco-auditors of the Green Impact Initiative at the University.

Those students implementing changes in their households reported savings of approximately £20-£30 pounds in the three months of the exercise. I am confident of the sustainability of this practice. In addition, the 17 students joining the Green Impact Award (GIA) have trained as eco-auditors, evaluating 24 staff-based teams, and demonstrating that they can perform a professional job while giving them the experience of being eco-auditors.

To summarise, this experience demonstrates that by promoting engagement and real-life projects, we can achieve real changes both in the students' life and the way we teach these complex topics.

References

Education for Sustainable Development in the Faculty of Health and Social Care
(Richard Hayward, Faculty of Health and Social Care, Pathway Lead, MSc Management and Leadership in Health and Social Care)

The role of education for sustainable development is to help people develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and for the future, and to act upon those decisions.


Global Leadership is a module that makes up part of the Faculty of Health and Social Care MSc Framework, which is accessed by a range of health and social care professionals. The module explores urgent global issues, e.g. poverty; global warming; rise of India/China; credit crunch; and food distribution/over consumption.

The first part of the assessment is a group presentation exploring an urgent global issue selected by the group. The second part is a 3,200-word reflective account that explores the urgent global issue selected for the presentation.

It is suggested that the assignment is structured using a decision making process. One that is recommended is the ASK SIRL model developed by Rayment (2001).
Decision Making Process
A appreciate a problem exists
S specify scope and scale of the problem
K causes
S solutions generation and selection
I implementation management and control
R review did it solve this problem?
L learn improve process

The group presentation explores the ASK elements, while individual review looks at the SIRL section, exploring what they can do as individuals to have an impact on their chosen urgent global issue.

This module allows students to explore across different cultures the attitude to some of the world's most intractable problems. It challenges existing beliefs and encourages students to think more widely than perhaps they are used to.

Reference

Faculty of Education ESD Report
(Sara Knight, Faculty of Education, Senior Lecturer in Early Years)

Both Departments in the Faculty are helping students to see how and why they should be engaging children with their environments, which means educating today's students in ESD first. Staff lead by example: Anthony Russell is working with refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, running university courses on 17 computers powered by two solar panels and a satellite connection. Sara Knight is a leader in the development of Forest School, nationally and internationally, with three books on the subject, and papers at conferences in the UK and abroad, aiming to engage children in caring for the environment as a part of their developing sense of self.

BA primary pathways cover many aspects of ESD, a hot topic in primary education. This year saw a one-day seminar for PGCE primary students from Chelmsford and Peterborough, offering workshops from the RSPB, the RHS, Essex LEA and from specialists in Eco-schools, Earth Education, Bushcraft, Forest School and Ecotherapy. A three-minute video sampling the day is available.

Pathways in the Department of Educational Studies offer opportunities for theoretical debates and further investigations into education as a global issue:
- who has access to education
- what is taught, in the UK and in other countries
- where teaching takes place

Pathways include ESD issues in at least one compulsory module, and there are optional specialist modules at levels 1 and 2 on outdoor learning. Many students choose ESD-related topics for their final dissertations. This year we have started a master's module on Comparing Outdoor Experiences.

The Nature and Society Module in ALSS
(Dr David Skinner, Faculty of Arts, Law and Social Sciences, Reader in Sociology, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences)

*Nature and Society* is a final year, final semester module taken by Sociology and Psychosocial Studies undergraduates. It explores the relationship between social and natural worlds and considers how social science should best engage with biological knowledge. These conceptual questions are considered through discussion of three substantive topics: humans and animals; the implications of new life sciences; and climate change. In this final segment students are asked: how can we put 'society' into a discussion of climate change?
The social sciences have much to add to a discussion of climate change. They can highlight how both the causes and the consequences of climate change are at one and the same time both natural and social. In addition, they allow full appreciation of the entrenchment (and difficulty of shifting) both the socio-technical systems and everyday practices that drive high carbon consumption. We also have a major part to play in exploring ordinary people’s complex relationship to expertise and advice: how do we evaluate and respond to scientific warnings of risk? Lastly the social science imagination should be an asset in discussions of what a sustainable, post-carbon society might look like.

Having said this, teaching climate change to social scientists is not without its challenges. Sociologists and Psychosocial Studies students are used to asserting the primacy of the social over the natural; they are not always comfortable with a discussion of the natural limits on social development. Many students also lack confidence in the natural sciences and feel this disqualifies them from making an analytical contribution to discussion of climate change. Also, our students do not like to be told what to think and are instinctively distrustful of what they see as climate change propaganda. Lastly, many students find the conventional ways in which the topic is framed to be ‘boring’ or disempowering.

I have found three ways of meeting those challenges that have paid dividends. The first is to highlight the particular contribution of social science – what expertise do we have that climate scientists do not have? The example I use here is Elizabeth Shove’s work on ‘the sociology of sweat’, which explores the changing values and practices around body odour, clothing and housing that push up energy consumption. The second thing I have learnt is that guilt is not a positive emotion: on the contrary, students respond well to a deconstruction of the policy discourse that suggests our personal choices can damn or save the world. We develop a critique of this ‘out-sourcing of responsibility’ for climate change through often surprisingly lengthy and acrimonious discussions of recycling. Lastly, it is best to discuss climate change as something that is happening rather than as something that might happen and to explore its varied spatial impacts as part of a wider story of ongoing social change.