

UWTSD

Learning and Skills

Advocacy in the Anthropocene:

Giving the world 'a voice' through recognition of the physical interdependencies that articulate global material interactions.

About the project

Summary

To support undergraduates in the Humanities to take more responsibility for the part they play in shaping the material world and to encourage them to think about sustainability in novel ways, I developed a module that is structured around hands-on interactions with a range of planetary resources entitled 'Interactions with the Environment'. The module encourages students to recognise that their physical materiality is inextricably entwined with the rest of the materials of the world.

As waste disposal is a pressing global resource issue, part of the course considered how 'rubbish' is approached and negotiated cross-culturally and theoretically.

To reduce the distance between 'learning-about' and 'learning-from' the material world, the students were asked to bring their non-compostable waste into class each week. The aim: to create our own landfill site in class. As we learned about the complexities of creating and dealing with rubbish across the world, we also watched our own rubbish-dump grow in the corner of the room. In the final week of the course, I asked the students to re-engage with the accumulated discarded material and negotiate between themselves an appropriate course of action to deal with the environmental repercussions and the impact of their own consumption.

Being in close proximity to the pile and watching it amass obliged the students to recognise the quantity of waste they produced during just that class. Engaging physically with the detritus of their consumption enabled the students to take ownership of that consumption, and with horror realised how little of it was recyclable. Subsequently, through noting that the majority of their campus waste comes from an assortment of drinks containers, students successfully petitioned the university catering contractors to supply drinks in recyclable or reusable containers.

The results

The problem

Our current planetary environmental predicament has arisen, at least in part, due to the unsustainable consumption patterns of the rich global 'North'. As a lecturer who wishes to make a contribution to



Profile

- HEI
- 11,400 students (includes full and part time students)
- 2,125 staff
- Urban and Rural campuses

addressing this, my problem is: how do I enable students to recognize that their actions are important in shaping the material world and to start taking responsibility for those actions?

The approach

Taking an experiential approach to learning, a radical new module was developed to bring students face to face with their own personal consumption patterns to allow them to 'learn-from' rather than 'learn-about'. By encouraging a direct tactile interaction with the material in tandem with free-flowing discussion of the relevant sustainability issues, motivation towards behaviour change is engendered.

Our goals

Since the motivation to alter personal behaviour is likely to come through understanding that we are both directly connected to, and inextricably of, the material world, students need to be supported to realise that through their own, and collective, actions we determine whether our planet is fairly sustained or damaged.

Obstacles and solutions

The feeling that "I don't make a difference" - Witness accumulation of my personal waste over course duration

The feeling that "I am not connected to the material world" - Tactile interaction with the materials that make up the world

Performance and results

Amongst other actions students were asked to collect their rubbish over a term and to collectively inspect and analyse it. This practice forced student to recognise the part they play in consuming and creating waste. This visualised their choices and demonstrated how they were unsustainable and needed to alter. From engaging with their own rubbish directly students recognised their culpability directly and as a result opted to alter their consumption behaviours in the future.

The future

Lessons learned

Experiential engagement is a powerful, dynamic alternative to traditional pedagogical methodologies. The outcomes of this module suggest that 'learning-from' provokes behaviour changes more effectively than 'learning-about'.

Sharing your project

Academic presentations have been taken to conferences to share this novel method and encourage good practice.

What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

'I would be delighted if the University were to win a Green Gown Award. Such a prestigious accolade would acknowledge our commitment to sustainability as one of our core values and most importantly it would celebrate the excellent work and inspiring work of colleagues and students across the University's campuses.'

Professor Medwin Hughes, DL Vice-Chancellor University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Further information

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