

## 'Happy Meal'

### From:

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### Faculty/Department/Programme/External partners:

UNESCO Chair in Social Learning and Sustainable Development

### Abstract:

Prof. Dr. Arjen Wals often begins his lectures by handing out pieces of a Happy Meal from fast food chain McDonald's. The students, divided into small teams, are all given part of the meal: the Coke, the chips, the hamburger or the 'free' toy. They have to answer three questions: What does it contain? Where does it come from? Can we produce a Happy Meal that actually makes us happy?

### Contact:

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### Website:

Wals keeps a blog:  
<http://transformativelearning.nl/>

### Related literature:

Wals, A.E.J. (2010) Mirroring, Gestaltswitching and Transformative Social Learning: stepping stones for developing sustainability competence. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 11(4), 380-390.  
Sriskandarajah, N., Tidball, K., Wals, A.E.J., Blackmore, C. and Bawden, R. (2010) Resilience in learning systems: case studies in university education. *Environmental Education Research*, 16(5/6), 559-573.

### Description:

The students, divided into small teams, are all given part of the meal: the Coke, the chips, the hamburger or the 'free' toy. They have to answer two questions:

[What does it contain? Where does it come from?](#)

It is remarkable what students find on the Internet, at the library and even through observations at McDonald's. They discover, for instance, that fast food chains use a specific type of potato which guarantees that the chips will maintain their quality. As a result, the potato growers of McDonald's grow only a few varieties of potatoes. As a result, these varieties are more sensitive to diseases and pests, which compels farmers to use more pesticides. This sensitivity in its turn leads to the use of genetically modified varieties. The students also discover that McDonald's, due to consumer pressure, does not use genetically modified potato varieties. However, another team finds out that the diet coke does contain genetically modified corn sweeteners. This gets a discussion going on genetic modification. The toy also raises a lot of questions each time: Where was it made? By whom? How long is it played with? What happens to it in the end? Each product from the Happy Meal stirs up another discussion and students become aware of matters they never used to dwell on before. However, becoming aware of something but not acting on it leads to apathy and feelings of powerlessness. That is why a crucial third question is asked which they have to answer the week after that:

[Can we produce a Happy Meal that actually makes us happy?](#)

The teams discuss alternatives that are healthier and CO2 neutral and are produced with more respect for people and animals. One team comes up with an alternative for the toy in the form of a fair trade toy, whereas others suggest organic meat from the neighbourhood. The subsequent calculation exercise shows that the alternative is much more expensive. This leads to a discussion about consumers' responsibility and their willingness and capacity to pay more for their food. By dissecting a Happy Meal, students learn to ask questions, look for reliable information and think critically. It raises matters like North-South relations, health issues, ethical issues, the role of businesses, consumerism, crop biodiversity, child labour, etc. They learn to adopt a different approach. Not so they would never eat another Happy Meal, but to learn to take a critical view on food consumption in relation to sustainability. What is interesting in this type of learning is that heterogeneous teams often find more creative and better thought-out solutions than homogeneous teams. Prof. Dr. Arjen Wals wants to make students think about sustainability and develop sustainability competences. The idea is for each graduate to check for each problem and each solution whether or not it will lead to a depletion of resources or the exploitation of people somewhere in the world. The graduates thus often have to come up with innovative solutions that result in an integrated sustainable community or school or sustainable agriculture. Someone who is capable of this, has the ability to think 'differently', think out of the box. Someone like that should also be able to picture him or herself in other social environments and minds. It is about a change in perspective: from a western culture to another, from the present to a different era, from local to international, from a young person to an older person or even from a human to another species. However, it is more than that. Sustainability does not have a clear end goal. Whether a chosen path is sustainable changes constantly and must be permanently assessed. This science should not have a paralysing effect. We simply do not live long enough to be able to say with certainty that something we invent today is indeed sustainable. Students must therefore also learn to deal with uncertainties. However, within this context of uncertainty the framework of values (sufficient, for all, for always) remains unchanged, as a continuous foothold in the pursuit of sustainable development.