

Teaching Sustainable Consumption

notes from workshop discussions at Copenhagen SCORAI conference, June 2018.

Following a lively speed-talk presentation of 5 teaching innovations, the group broke up into four discussion topics, to share ideas and expertise about teaching issues in SC.

Notes from the session are summarised below, as part of a wider, ongoing discussion about teaching, exchange of ideas and experience, and mutual support.

For more information about teaching SC, please see the Teaching section of the SCORAI website.

1 - Experiential learning (notes by Jen Dyer)

- Experiential learning could be applicable for any subject but perhaps has increased relevance for sustainability/sustainable consumption teaching because it can be useful to highlight the complexity of how theory plays out outside the classroom
- There is a real potential for value shifts through experiential learning as it is encouraging the 'doing' rather than someone else telling you how it has impacted them. There were a number of good examples that people had come across/already implement e.g.:
 - Fashion detox - where students are asked to not buy any clothes for a certain period of time and then asked to reflect on their experience...many students realised they were in a sort of 'habit' or addiction to buying clothes and this exercise really made them reflect on the reasons behind this
- Experiential learning has the potential to develop employability skills in students e.g. teamwork, communication etc. aligning with employability agenda of Unis. It also has the potential for tangible examples that can be used in job interviews to set students apart from other candidates
- We discussed ideas for how small examples of experiential learning can be applied in teaching settings rather than having to base a whole module around it e.g. an assessment could include an experiential learning component or more reflection built in throughout courses
- Often experiential learning involves making students uncomfortable/putting the outside their comfort zone which is a great way to learn - in the Community Engagement Project module it is always the challenges that students get the most out of especially in terms of developing initiative, problem solving skills, adaptability and resilience

2 - Assessment and Innovation (notes by Lucie Middlemiss)

- We suggested that it is useful to foreshadow the assessment in the design of workshops leading up to it, in order to give students a flavour of what we are looking for in the assessment.
- We discussed the need for a variety of assessments including posters, oral presentations and oral exams.
- We liked the idea of co-creating a publication of some sort with students, which would then stand as something they could refer to in CVs.
- We discussed the value of participatory action learning in sustainable consumption, potentially having students intern in local organisations and providing a resource for those organisations (albeit that this approach is quite time consuming for the teaching staff).
- We discussed the value of continuous assessment.
- We discussed the possibility of assessment through workshop type activities during which students have to create a presentation based on an activity.
- We were enthusiastic about the idea of oral exams on this topic, which as Marlyne pointed out, need not be overly time consuming and have the major benefit of avoiding paper marking! They also reward good performance for those that are good at expressing themselves orally, but less good at written work.

3 - Hot stuff: *What sorts of topics energize students, leaving them excited to attend class and participate in class discussions?* (notes by Emily Huddart Kennedy)

Themes:

- Connect to students' personal lives and opinions
- Focus on the positive

Detailed notes:

- Things to do with daily life are enjoyable. For instance, asking students to use a diary to reflect on their consumption (e.g., of water) over several days and summarize the experience. Alternatively, asking them to try to reduce their environmental impact in some way (e.g., shorter showers) and report on challenges and successes. Another example was asking students to reflect on how they spent their money for a week. All students provided the caveat that this week was "unique" or "unusual" because they were sick, or had a visitor, or had to travel, etc. The point being that there is no "normal" consumption and that our consumption practices are shaped by context.
- Helping students learn problem-solving skills. For example, students liked hearing about creative solutions to environmental issues. Then giving students time to find out about innovative solutions—everything from product design to co-housing. One participants

connected solutions to personal lives by suggesting to students that dorms are a type of co-housing and asking them to reflect on what works and what doesn't (as well as to devise solutions to what doesn't work) based on their experiences.

- A final suggestion was that students love to learn quick facts that make them feel that they have specialized knowledge about environmental issues / solutions.

4 - Managing tensions between teaching and activism (notes by Gill Seyfang)

Themes

- helping students make the link between theory and everyday practice/activism
- reflecting on our role as educators – is it to *inform* or *instruct* about sustainability?

Notes:

- it's a tricky balance to achieve - some students complained that SC teaching is "too normative" when we start teaching about power structures and social change.
- other students are very focussed on activism first and foremost and can be uncritical of those ideas, these students need to be brought back to the literature/theories.
- Our role as teachers can be to help bridge the gap between abstract theory and concrete action – perhaps by putting the student experience first, and building up from lived experience, adding on theory, and then push students to critique the theories.
- We had a lively debate about whether the teacher's role is to 'spark interest' and critical engagement with ideas about SC? Or to teach what SC 'is' and try to 'demonstrate' it to students through our own lives (practicing what we preach).
 - This touches on ideas that there is "no such thing as a neutral education" – we are always, inadvertently, passing on a worldview. And what we can do is be explicit, recognise it and reflect on how it affects our teaching 'message'.
 - It also exposes a disagreement about whether there is such a thing as an objectively defined SC and we know what it looks like, and how to 'do' it. OR, are there lots of different viewpoints about what SC is and how to achieve it.
 - If the former, then we can choose to embody those principles and live them (or not). If the latter, then we can teach students about the range of viewpoints, and let them make up their own minds, knowing that there is no such thing as a correct version of 'SC'.
- David Orr's work on 'what is education for?' is an example of using it was to ask students 'what are you here for?' at the start and end of a course. Is it to get a good job, earn more money, and consume more stuff? or is it to learn how to engage constructively with the world as a citizen? How do their views change over the course?