Exploring the Experiential Dimension of Sustainability Courses

Cassandra Kuyvenhoven
&
Peter Graham
School of Environmental Studies
Queen’s University
Peter Graham, PhD candidate in the School of Environmental Studies at Queen’s University.

Cassandra Kuyvenhoven, PhD candidate in the School of Environmental Studies at Queen’s University.

Dr. Rena Upitis, Professor in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University.

Dr. Adeela Arshad-Ayaz, Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University.
Guiding Questions

What do students feel when they learn about sustainability?

What is an appropriate emotional response to taking a sustainability course? How does the atmosphere of the university classroom impact their reactions?
Open-ended, online survey about emotional reactions to learning about environmental issues like:

- Biodiversity
- Atmosphere and climate change
- Reliance on fossil fuels
- Global food production
ENSC 203: Environment and Sustainability

This introductory course in the Environmental Studies program provides a first look at an interdisciplinary approach to complex environmental problems, and the formulation of decisions relevant to environmental perception, management and conservation. The course emphasizes the diverse contributions of the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences regarding human/environment interactions, and the challenges of building interdisciplinary approaches.
Survey Questions

1. Have there been instances when you were surprised by the course material? If so, please give examples.
2. Was there anything that happened in the class that made you angry or frightened? If so, what was it?
3. Has this course caused you to change your behaviour in any way? If so, how?
4. Do you think this course will cause your classmates to make changes in their routine behaviours? Why or why not?
5. Overall, how did this class make you feel?
Emerging Themes

Surprised by:

- The severity of sustainability issues;
- The timeliness of the issues; and,
- Lack of education and access to information.

“I am not currently enrolled in other ENSC courses, so learning about some of the information in this course was sort of like a wake up call for what the future holds.”
Emerging Themes

Feelings of:
- Guilt;
- Sadness; and,
- Empowerment.

“This course made me feel like trying to make a difference.”
Emerging Themes

Feelings of anger or fear around issues of:
  • Uncertainty;
  • Future; and,
  • The current state of environmental damage.

“It is upsetting that I only learned about so many things now. This should have been presented way earlier and there should be put more effort in raising awareness in general.”

“EVERYTHING made me angry. Although it was great to learn about some positive sides to sustainability that I may not have heard about, it still made me very frustrated as there is so much to do, and so many barriers that come up on the way to making change” (emphasis original).
Emerging Themes

Individual behavioural changes:
- Thinking local;
- Becoming more involved;
- Awareness of individual impacts.

“It has made me even more determined.”

“I am more conscious about my actions and the consequences.”
Emerging Themes

Peer behavioural changes:
• Temporary change v. long-term change;
• Hopeful (but wary).

“Doubtful. I think the larger importance is the systemic and political change and this is where the focus of my environmentalism will come from.”

“For me, this course was a lot of common sense. But when I look at my friends and their routines, I don't think they realize how much impact their actions have, and how easy it is to change them.”
Emerging Themes

Overall feelings:
- Reflexivity;
- Impetus for change;
- Nihilistic; and,
- Hopeful.

“Afraid, but optimistic.”

“Naively hopeful.”

“It is both depressing and inspiring to me to see what we have done and what we can do.”
Other Interesting Themes

Environmentalism as deprivation: (in response to peer behavioural changes) “Maybe if they really care, but probably not cuz we're all selfish.”

Overwhelmed: “The Earth is doomed.”

Personal responsibility: “I feel like I, more than ever, have a right and responsibility for the environment. I am much more likely to take part in environmental citizenship.”
Conclusions

• Contribution to both the literature on Education for Sustainable Development, but perhaps even more importantly the philosophy of education literature.

• Increase educators’ awareness of underlying emotional responses to course curricula.
Thanks

Thank you to the Centre for Teaching Learning for supporting our research through the 2016 Educational Research Grant.

Thank you to Concordia University for its Aid to Research Related Events, Publication, Exhibition and Dissemination Activities (ARRE) Program.

Thank you for listening!