

# WORKING WITH SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION IN A SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH COURSE

*Susan Gollifer and Caitlin Wilson*

University of Iceland

## THE LEARNING CONTEXT

Issues in Social and Educational Research (ISER) is an established master's level course that has been run since 2010 as part of the International Studies in Education Programme at the University of Iceland, School of Education. The course is run in English every two years and is relatively small, attracting some 15 international students who are preparing for the thesis phase of their degree. The participants have included exchange students and an increasing number of Icelandic students from different university departments.

Our intention in choosing the course as an ActSHEN pilot was to explore how a conventional course that was not specifically designed to address sustainability concerns could be aligned with student-centered sustainability education. Course design reflected the ActSHEN principles formulated by the ActSHEN group in Helsinki, whilst maintaining the course outcomes as presented in the university course catalogue. Our main focus was on developing student awareness of ethical concerns when conducting research and on generating student responsibility for their own learning.

The teaching and learning processes were developed to emphasise student-centred approaches to increase responsibility for pedagogical decision-making (content, teaching and learning, and assessment processes). The content of the course was guided by students' own research motivations and interests and included peer-teaching, teacher as a resource, student selection of teaching and learning methods and materials, and group work using small-scale research tasks. We also applied a series of student-centred tasks aimed at generating dialogue in order to enhance student critical reflection, creativity and communication on how the issues covered could be addressed in their research.

## HOW DID THE PILOT REFLECT THE ACTSHEN PRINCIPLES?

The course does not work with explicit sustainability content, but instead focuses on sustainability in relation to design and pedagogical approach of the course to foster ethical decision making during the research process. We emphasised the ActSHEN principle of student-centred pedagogy that promotes student influence on what and how they learn. The extent to which the course develops action competence is implied in student recognition of the consequences of their research on ecological and human wellbeing, and their capacity to make responsible decisions when faced with complex and unforeseen circumstances. The course works with a pedagogical assumption that developing students' research competence is essential to enhance

professional and ethical practice, and also to critically review current professional practices, by increasing student agency to critically engage with sustainability concerns as researchers.

This course is part of a larger programme developed for international students. As there are few restrictions in place at the School of Education as regards introducing new courses, there is more opportunity and scope to test innovative pedagogical approaches to promoting sustainability in Higher Education (HE) than perhaps in other university settings. As the pilot project is part of the International Studies in Education Programme, we identified opportunities for advocacy in terms of sharing learning experiences with students, ActSHEN partners, across the faculties within the School of Education, and in the form of papers, and through informal and formal networks.

In order to discover how students experienced a course design underpinned by sustainability principles, we asked ActSHEN project members to hold focus group interviews with our students. We also asked students to provide feedback on their experiences of attending the pilot course in relation to what they felt they had gained from the pedagogical approach, and what they felt they had missed out from attending this course rather than a more conventional research methodology course.

## STUDENT RESPONSES

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Students expressed some discomfort and insecurity at this “unusual” approach, as one student put it. Another said: “Flexibility was a challenge for me. I’ve had a lot of practice in figuring out expectations and then matching them, but not much experience with setting my own.” We believed that this was partly due to internalised expectations of higher education to produce graduates with a predetermined set of knowledge and skills as opposed to students and teachers collaboratively working with existing knowledge to co- and re-create knowledge.

The majority of the students suggested that they had experienced something new and unlike the teaching applied to other courses they had attended. They used expressions such as: “there is another way of teaching, for example. Not this typical traditional like [approach]”. This also led them to look at how they understood learning. One student referred to: “a new way of learning”. Responses further suggested that they understood the pedagogical approach as “informal learning in a way that maybe you keep longer”. As one student pointed out:

I appreciated that we were able to make decisions about how the course would be structured, but that we were not the only voices. At the beginning of the class I really had no idea what to expect, and so having your input was also valuable.

The reference to being guided appears to be an important aspect that worked for students and in particular when asked to carry out self and peer assessments:

The assessment rubrics we used for assignments are also something that I would want to use in teaching. I found they were open to interpretation while providing a guide to make sure we didn't veer too far off course.

The concept of teacher as initiator was also referred to in the context of setting up dialogue forums to facilitate students' development of research ideas:

You were using a method that helped students to work according to their needs on the subject and it was really helpful for the preparation of the research project. The group work was really good. It was great to explain things to each other with our own words. It facilitated the learning.

Students who were used to student-driven approaches described the teaching as: "it's based on our experience... It's a lot of in a way, we are sharing experience". However, when they described how it differed from other student-centred approaches their responses highlighted sustainability education principles concerned with ethical decision making:

I looked at it as, this is the participating area, because this is individual-driven, - oriented...they allow you to do more of what you are going to face in the society and you get prepared for the challenges, so it's a, like the ethical issues, I was reading it last night and I begin to look, these are the things I never thought before, you know? Like considering some vulnerable group of people, if I'm making a decision, you know, for me, if I want to, if I'm in the opinion, I would just generalize but now I would first of all seek their consent before making a decision.

## LESSONS LEARNED: GIVING POWER THAT IS NOT WANTED; SEEKING TO USE POWER THAT IS NOT FORTHCOMING

We were aware of the challenges that working with an established university course within a broader HE programme might present as regards institutional, teacher and student expectations of learning and roles and responsibilities of the student and the teacher etc. The students came from a range of international and subject backgrounds with various work and life experiences, so we further anticipated a wide range of expectations in relation to learning outcomes, participation, pedagogical decision making and assessment processes. However, when we reviewed and discussed the student responses, we recognised a recurring theme: the role of power dynamics in sustainability in higher education, as we now discuss.

## IMPOSITION OF THE STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH

In part we had assumed that the students would be receptive to unconventional approaches and that it was sufficient to explain our pilot intentions as a means of preparing them for the anticipated challenges. From our perspective, the redesign of the course was a mild adjustment to reflect sustainability in higher education while conforming to higher education parameters. What we learned from this process is that it is easy to assume that our normative purpose, in this case sustainable higher education, will be acceptable to all, but we realised that there continues to be a strong element of "imposition" involved within a process of giving students a "genuine"

choice. Our understanding of sustainability education has evolved over years of identifying with the concepts and becoming part of this community of thought, so we have made the choice to position ourselves. However, without ongoing dialogue to better understand sustainability principles and develop commitment to sustainable education approaches, there seems to be a pedagogical gap between pursuing sustainability goals and meeting student expectations within the necessary processes that this entails in the context of a 10 ECTS course.

In our course, over time, willingness to engage in sustainability education processes did develop, though perhaps this is only due to growing trust and rapport. We cannot assume that students will embrace unconventional approaches every time, and even once they experience and understand the rationale for themselves. In order to fill this pedagogical gap, we learned the importance of transparency, preparation and accepting different ways of seeing things as part of a genuine choice in inviting students into new processes when working in a normative agenda. However, we also began to recognise that institutionalised student-teacher power relations may mean a genuine choice is never possible, as we will discuss below.

## INSTITUTIONALISED STUDENT-TEACHER POWER RELATIONS

Even if the pedagogical gap is successfully addressed, there are a number of other factors that limit the wider impact of sustainable pedagogy in higher education. The higher education reality within which we are working means that students have their own purposes for their education, that their experience is still predominantly of conventional pedagogy outside of our courses and that we as non-permanent faculty members have little influence and therefore impact on institutionalising sustainability as pedagogy, let alone in larger institutional structures. It is important to remember that we are working within an institution that is supposed to be working towards sustainability. The sustainability policy of the University of Iceland states, “*The University of Iceland must intertwine a vision of sustainability with changed teaching methods because active student participation generates new ideas and solutions.*” The issue therefore becomes more one of how we as educators choose to engage with the decision making process in terms of promoting sustainability education pedagogy.

## POWER IN PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES

These institutional constraints lead us to return to where we can have influence, even if it is small; this is in the pedagogical choices we make in our own courses. In this light, the gap between our intentions and student expectations becomes even more important to address, as we have suggested above. Interestingly, the changes we can make within our system also take on new significance for teacher and student responsibility. Assessment thus becomes linked to a responsibility to display our ethical stance (proposed responses to creating a better world informed by our knowledge and skills) rather than the conventional display of what we know in relation to others (i.e. being positioned based on a grade); and in response the

responsibility of the student as expressed in their ethical stance when engaged in dialogue and how they choose to use their knowledge and skills in the development of their proposed research.

## UNDERSTANDING PEDAGOGY AS THE VEINS TO PERPETUATE SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

ACTSHEN members have often questioned how this course is sustainability education given that it has no explicit sustainability content. This alerts us to the fact that the term sustainability education can be applied to the way in which a course happens, rather than only to what we learn in terms of content. Learning therefore becomes associated with form and content. Based on our experience, students require time to reflect on, understand, and make connections about why doing education in this student-centered way may be important and relevant for sustainability.

This course will run again in the autumn semester 2016/2017. As one of us continues to be responsible for the course, we have the opportunity to continue to influence its development and implementation and draw from the experience of the pilot courses and other ActSHEN project initiatives. We also have the opportunity to share our lessons learned with faculty members who are responsible for other courses on the International Studies in Education Programme. In this sense, there is potential for this intervention to continue in our institution and for the pedagogic principles related to sustainability education to be sustained and eventually embedded into the ISEP teaching and learning approach. However, perhaps the main lesson that we take away with us from this pilot, in terms of embedding sustainability awareness and action in higher education, is that the opening up of discussions of ethical implications of education and research, critical reflection on the reality of the systems in which we live, learn and work, and the changing minds of individual students become the veins through which we can perpetuate sustainability and sustainability education.