

The Heart of the Matter: Infusing Sustainability Values in Education

Experiences of ESD with the Earth Charter



Celebrating the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair on Education
for Sustainable Development
and the Earth Charter



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The Use of the Earth Charter at the Primary Teachers Education Department, University of Crete, Greece

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Introduction

Humanity is facing a sustainability crisis manifested through widespread poverty, violation of human rights, environmental degradation and climate change. Within such a reality, there is an urgent need for ways to nurture and empower people of all ages with values that will help to transform unsustainable practices and help people learn to live together sustainably. Education at all levels, especially higher education, bears its own share of the sustainability crisis. Much of the political discourse about higher education was instrumental in creating and served a development model that caused the current sustainability crisis. Acquiring, or rather clarifying, values and a meaningful philosophy of life became outmoded, as most of the curricula driven by a positivistic philosophy favored “value-free,” “nondirective,” and “nonjudgmental” approaches to teaching and learning.

As a university Professor teaching methodology and education for sustainability, I was searching for ways to overcome current tendencies toward compartmentalization of knowledge and neglect of ethics and values education that are inherent in the concept of sustainable development (SD). Through my search, I identified the Earth Charter as a potential framework that could fulfil my critical pedagogy needs. The Earth Charter sets forth ethical principles and general guidelines for sustainable ways of living. As it challenges people to think about ethical values and to expand their ethical consciousness, it was thought that it could serve the needs of my courses.

The History and Context

As a staff member involved in the UNESCO Chair ICT in Education for Sustainable Development and RCE Crete (Regional Centre of Expertise) on Education for Sustainable Development, I started initiatives with Earth Charter International to explore the promotion of the Earth Charter in the Greek-speaking world, targeting educators, students, NGOs, and a wider audience. The outcome of this initiative was the formation the Earth Charter Hellas website (<http://earthcharterhellas.edc.uoc.gr/>) in 2012.

The Earth Charter provides a very broad perspective on learning to live together sustainably and thus is helpful for educators who wish to develop a comprehensive approach to education for sustainability. A methodology was developed to integrate the Earth Charter in various courses at the Department of Primary Education at the University of Crete, and efforts have been made to find ways to expand it to the local community, primarily through student practicum placements.

A critical decision concerning our attempt to integrate the Earth Charter was the merging of vertical and horizontal modes of course curriculum design. The vertical integration design ensures continuity and structures the content in sequence from core to more complex and specified streams. This provides a clear picture for learning, as students are able to understand how the content is developed and organized in a course. The vertical integration also assumes that discrete courses may combine content from two or more subject domains.



University of Crete



Earth Charter website in Greek

The horizontal integration includes broader curricular content from different disciplinary areas and knowledge domains, especially through an interdisciplinary approach within the course areas. Our pedagogy derives from a transformative learning paradigm and the Earth Charter, directed to the following four educational objectives: (a) helping students deal with the world's complexity of sustainability issues; (b) overcoming the dominant compartmentalization of knowledge into discrete entities that prevents interdisciplinary curricula; (c) helping students deconstruct their unsustainable perceptions, beliefs, and actions, applying values clarification and critical reflection; and (d) promoting experiential and constructivist learning. Such educational objectives appear particularly relevant for education geared towards sustainable development.

Inherent in this approach is the key learning process of "learning to clarify one's own values" together with merging the 3Hs: the Head, the Heart, and the Hand. Learning to clarify one's own values necessitates the process of introspection and learning to critically reflect upon one's inner values and knowledge constructions, which in turn are reflected in one's outer practices and behaviors. Through this process it is possible to deconstruct unsustainable constructions and their underpinning values that lead to unsustainable practices and create new constructions that are more appropriate to sustainability. Introspection gives people the chance to identify and evaluate their inner thoughts, feelings and desires through critical self-reflection. Merging the Head, the Heart and the Hand responds to the need for adopting a holistic approach to teaching and learning to live together sustainably. The head is about cognitive function and being logical, while the heart is about affective functions, ethics, values, emotions, and feelings, and the hands are about human agency, that is the disposition and ability to act as agents of change. The Earth Charter provides a framework that enhances the interaction of the 3Hs (Figure 1).



Figure 1

Implementation

Since 2012, sustainability issues identified through the Earth Charter were horizontally integrated into the following undergraduate courses at the Dept. of Primary Education, University of Crete:

1. Didactics and Education for Sustainable Development
2. Theory of Teaching and Learning
3. Cross-disciplinary Approaches to Values
4. Global Education
5. Alternative Models of Teaching and Learning
6. Curriculum and Hypermedia
7. ICTs and Education for Sustainable Development

It is worth pointing out that the total number of students participating in these courses surpasses 1,200 over the last two academic years. Vertically, the Earth Charter was presented as a seminar to students in the 2012-13 academic year.

Some examples

In one of the courses I teach entitled, "Cross-disciplinary Approaches to Values", the students are encouraged to think about the concept of learning to live together sustainably through the Earth Charter lenses, starting from their personal experiences. In a way, it turns students into active participants in the development of knowledge and understanding towards sustainable development issues. Through this course, students develop a basic understanding of the Earth Charter and its use as a pedagogical tool in learning to: clarify one's own values; understand the influence that various sustainability themes, such as bio-cultural diversity and climate change, are having globally and locally (more specifically on the island of Crete); connect Section I of the Earth Charter (Respect and Care for the Community of Life) to the situation currently experienced by the people living on the island of Crete; and use transformative learning, problem-based learning, and service learning strategies to identify possible solutions to local sustainability problems and act appropriately.

Students receive a digital pack of Earth Charter materials, largely downloaded from the Earth Charter International resources, and are given instructions for their reading. In general, students are introduced to the following units: origin, history and development of the Earth Charter; the Earth Charter and eco-pedagogy; the four principles of the Earth Charter, their ethics and values; the EC as an ethical framework for learning to live sustainably and using the EC as a teaching and learning tool. Special attention is given to the meaning of the four principles and sub-principles included in Section I "Respect and Care for the Community of Life". In small groups of two to three, students are encouraged to reflect on how the principles listed in Section I of the Earth Charter apply to the situation experienced by people on the island of Crete in relation to sustainability challenges. Students are also asked to further explore the question, "How can you use the Earth Charter to raise critical consciousness and empower affected people to change the current situation?" Particular emphasis in this course is given to sustainability issues that local communities and people experience, such as climate change.

An adequate recognition and analysis of the ethical meaning of the key issues surrounding climate change is necessary in order to generate encompassing and adequate analyses and solutions of such an issue. In this context, culture has always played a role in informing human practices connected with sustainability challenges in general. The anthropogenic cause of sustainability challenges implies that learning to clarify one's own values is a critical learning process. To do this, the concepts of critical consciousness and critical reflective pedagogy, prevalent in Earth Charter, are adopted and the themes of the course are generated from the students' own languages and experiences. Thus, when examining climate change issues through a 'cultural lens' enabled by the Earth Charter principles and critical pedagogy, a number of specific questions are posed to students, in the beginning of the course, such as:

- What would you like society to look like in the future? Thinking about the idea that you have no control over who, where, or what you may become. Imagine the type of world in which you would like to live.
- How this imagined world differs from the current world you experience, locally and globally? Now, take some time and think "Who is responsible for building this world you are living in? Reflect also on your personal contribution to it.
- What actions, personal and collective are needed to make that preferred future a reality?

After this exercise and the follow-up discussion, more specific questions addressing climate change are posed to students, such as:

- How do values, including non-material values, affect decisions and actions about climate change?
- What role does culture play in strategies for adapting to climate change and in overcoming barriers to change?
- What do the irreversible losses of cultural and natural heritage caused by climate change mean to societies?
- How can art and technology contribute to the search for creative solutions to the negative impacts of climate change?

This exercise prompts students not only to imagine the world as they wished it could be, but also to compare it with the current reality and contemplate its causes. Students begin to imagine how life would be if people could think and act differently, reflecting on the values and practices that prevent people from reaching the world they imagine. The Earth Charter readings and principles have a significant appeal to students as the following poem written, originally in Greek, by a student who attended this course, reveals.

The students who have attended this course are implementing the principles and the philosophy of the Earth Charter in their school practica in local primary schools. The spirit of service learning is expressed by students in organizing solidarity interventions in the community and helping pupils who have learning difficulties by providing individual tutoring at their homes. Students keep a journal, complete a 10-15 page paper describing and analyzing their personal experiences and the changes they bring to themselves and to society at large. Experience shows that through service learning, students doing their practice realize that they belong to a broader community with common problems and difficulties, and that they must show responsibility and become agents of change.

The course on "Cross-disciplinary Approaches to Values" is connected with the course "ICTs and Education for Sustainable Development" that is taught by Professor Vassilios Makrakis. Our philosophy is that horizontal integration should not only be confined inside courses but also between courses. In this particular case, students attending the first course, transfer the knowledge and skills of the Earth Charter and sustainability theory to the second course, which focuses on developing video-clips and digital storytelling dealing with community-based sustainability problems integrated with service learning. More

than 100 video-clips and digital storytelling products dealing with a wide range of sustainability issues have been created by students, which are uploaded through the RCE Crete Youtube channel, largely guided by sustainable development and Earth Charter principles.

A Poem about the Earth Charter

Everybody likes to be loved

Everyone needs respect

You wish for democracy

A life without violence

Peace is being dreamt by all the children

Nobody wants to hear about wars

You despise racism

Do you care about the environment?

You should, because it's important.

You dream of a brighter future

So you dream of a sustainable future

Earth is our home and we should take care of it

We live together, animals, planet, and people

If one goes extinct, life will not be able to continue

I still haven't introduced myself

I am a friend who is against the bad and fight for the good

I am the Earth Charter.

Lessons learned

Challenging students to learn to clarify their own values and think more sustainably fosters their abilities to critically analyze current sustainability challenges. The courses in which we have integrated the Earth Charter give students the opportunity to explore issues through research and dialogue, to identify problems, to collaborate with peers in order to develop possible solutions, and to articulate the solutions in an attempt to affect a positive future for themselves, their community, and the world. These skills are essential to the students' future successes in education, career, and lifelong learning.

The implication is that education processes that draw upon the Earth Charter through critical reflection can help discern ways in which human potential can be realized. This is a 'caring' lifestyle orientation that education processes can help to clarify using the Earth Charter as a tool for critical reflection and for responsible action (learning to do). Many other principles have specific educational implications. For example, Principle 8 calls for the need to "advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired" (learning to know and learning to do).

In the long run, we hope to have more faculty members integrating the Earth Charter principles in their courses and make it more visible to the community. The experience we've had with the Earth Charter has been recently acknowledged by the Faculty of Education of the University of Crete. This was expressed by the Dean of the School of Education, Professor Antonis Hourdakos, who is planning to endorse the Earth Charter so that more faculty members will commit to adopting the principles and values of this document. This will be done in a public ceremony in the beginning of the Fall Semester 2014-2015, which coincides with the end of the DESD.

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