

Using the Earth Charter to Develop a Teaching for Sustainability Course at the University of Winnipeg

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Background

Fundamental changes to educational practice are being called for to create a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviours, and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. In Canada, provincial and territorial Departments and Ministries of Education, as well as other organizations, have been working to reorient the Kindergarten to Grade 12 public school system towards sustainability. Considerable work has been carried out related to curriculum design and resource development, identification of learning outcomes, in-service training for teachers, creation of indices for assessing students, and development of school sustainability policies (Michalos, et al., 2010; Swayze, et al., 2010; Swayze & Creech, 2009).

During the 1990s, UNESCO identified teacher-education institutions and teacher educators as key change agents in reorienting education to address sustainability (McKeown, Rosalyn and Hopkins, Charles (2005). Faculties of Education have an essential role in the evolution of learning practice to ensure that teachers are well prepared to advance new curricula, understand the learning outcomes, and participate actively in whole school approaches. In Canada, many universities and colleges have begun to address this. However, as in other countries, a variety of approaches and instructional techniques have been used.

“But, first and foremost our message [sustainable development] is directed towards people, whose well-being is the ultimate goal of all environment and development policies. In particular, the Commission is addressing the young. The world’s teachers will have a central role to play in bringing this to them,” (Foreword, Our Common Future, 1987, p33).

Developing the Teaching for Sustainability Course at the University of Winnipeg

Located in the province of Manitoba and consistently ranked in the Top-10 in the country on an annual basis by both [Maclean’s magazine](#) and [The Globe and Mail newspaper](#), the University of Winnipeg is a leader in academic excellence, Aboriginal education, environmental studies & sustainability, and theatre & the arts. The University of Winnipeg is committed to improving access to post-secondary education for all individuals, especially those people from non-traditional communities, and has created an innovative Opportunity Fund to assist students who are under-represented to attend UWinnipeg (<http://www.uwinnipeg.ca>).

In 2011, the University of Winnipeg launched a new Post Baccaalaureate Diploma in Education (PBDE) in Education for Sustainability. The program was designed to: a) suit the needs of teachers, team leaders in science and social studies, educators in informal educational settings such as museums and outdoor education institutions; and b) give students a comprehensive overview of formal and informal approaches to

sustainability education. Courses offered include a range of electives (e.g. field based learning, problem-based learning) and core courses (e.g. cultural perspectives and sustainability, comparative and international education.

also a document that invites the reader to develop an ethic around sustainability before creating and initiating lessons that address sustainability topics. Thus in our course the Earth Charter was used to help teachers clarify their perspectives and challenge some of their views about the purpose of teaching for sustainability.

Course Description and the Role of the Earth Charter

As the initial core course, *Introduction Teaching for Sustainability* serves as the foundations course for the Diploma, providing the essential background on what sustainability means and how it can be applied in learning and life contexts. The objectives for the course included exploring and examining a variety of approaches to education for sustainability, in addition to evaluating programs in existence in Winnipeg and Manitoba. As the course designers, we opted to use the Earth Charter as a framework for the course.

Why the Earth Charter?

The Earth Charter provides a very broad perspective on sustainability and thus is helpful for educators who wish to develop a comprehensive approach to education for sustainability. Issues such as social justice, non-violence and peace are often overlooked in educational frameworks for sustainable development. The Earth Charter is

Course Description

As a six credit hour course, classes were held from 8:30-4:30 during the first two weeks of July. Throughout the course, students were guided to explore the Earth Charter and its application to education for sustainability. *The Earth Charter in Action: Towards a Sustainable World* (Corcoran, P., Vilela, M. & Roerink, A., 2005) served as the ideal text for the course. Using the text structure framed around the Earth Charter principles, a topic or group of topics was chosen for each day of the course (see Chart 1: Course Outline). In addition to the text, additional readings that complimented the topics were also selected. These topics guided the readings, lectures, activities, facilitated discussions and guest presentations for each day. A variety of instructional approaches including field trips and experiential learning were used. All materials were made available to students on-line using a course website, which was also used for class discussions and submissions of assignments.

Chart 1: Course Outline

WEEK ONE				
Module	I Respect and Care for the Community of Life		III Social and Economic Justice	
Principles	1 Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.	3 Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.	9 Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.	11 Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.
	2 Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.	4 Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.	10 Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.	12 Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.
WEEK TWO				

Module	II Ecological Integrity		IV Democracy, Non Violence and Peace	
Principles	5 Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.	7 Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.	13 Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.	15 Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.
	6 Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.	8 Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.	14 Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.	16 Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

In addition to providing the framework for the course, the Earth Charter document was discussed in depth and Alicia Jimerez from the Earth Charter initiative was invited to speak to class via Skype during the first day of class. The Earth Charter was also used within the course based assignments. For example, one portfolio entry asked students to select one principle from each of the four categories of the Charter that was especially important to them and discuss how this principle could be incorporated into their own teaching

philosophy and used to create a lesson plan. Students also worked in groups to facilitate a workshop based on one of the Earth Charter categories. These workshops included classroom-based activities (debates, role play, problem-based learning etc.) and examples of action projects (community or school based). Several of the additional readings for the course we also based on the Earth Charter (see Chart 2: Earth Charter Based Readings)

Chart 2: Earth Charter Based Readings

Grant, T. and Littlejohn, G. (2004/2005). The Earth Charter: A shared vision for our common future.
Mukherjee, M, McDermott, B., and Bakhnova, M. (2005). Charting the Way Forward: Cases of the Earth Charter in Motion. Earth Charter International Secretariat. Green Teacher; Winter 2004/2005; 75; CBCA Education. pg. 28
Greenwald, R. (2007). Community Appearance: Opportunities in the Inner City. Green Teacher; Fall 2007; 82; CBCA Education. pg. 32
Viela, M. et al. (2005). Let's Learn a Sustainable Lifestyle with the Earth Charter. UNESCO Education Sector. San Jose: Costa Rica
Viela, M. And Corrigan, K. (2005). An Earth Charter Guidebook for Teachers. Earth Charter International Secretariat.
Viela, M. And Corrigan, K. Eds. (2007) Good Practices using the Earth Charter Earth. UNESCO Education Sector. San Jose: Costa Rica
Vilela, M and Rockefeller, S. (2010). The Earth Charter Initiative Handbook.
http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/invent/details.php?id=251
http://www.littleearthcharter.org/LEC_teachers.html

Reflection

Overall, the course was a huge success. As the co-instructors, it was rewarding and encouraging having the opportunity to work with such a dedicated and talented group of educators. We were also very pleased with how easily we were able to apply the Earth Charter to the course, using it as both a guide and instructional tool. It truly provided an ideal framework for course design, and we look forward to continuing to use it as the course evolves in future years.

References

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- Michalos, Alex C. Creech, H. Swayze, N., Kahlke, P. Maurine, Buckler, C., Rempel, K. (2010) *Measuring Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours Concerning Sustainable Development Among Tenth Grade Students in Manitoba*. IISD. <http://www.iisd.org/publications/pub.aspx?id=1384>
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- UNESCO (2005). *Report on Guidelines and Recommendations for Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainability*