

## A University Course based on the Earth Charter

### *Michigan State University, USA*



### Background

Teaching sustainability at the university level is an complex endeavour. What is it? What pedagogy might be used? How does one invite the entire community to learn together? These were some of the questions that were challenging professors Laurie Thorp and Terry Link, at Michigan State University, as they were developing a course that would bring the complexity of sustainability to a diverse group of learners. They decided to choose the Earth Charter as a vehicle for discussing and venturing into the ideas and ideals of sustainability. In the Earth Charter, they saw a vehicle for *personal, institutional, community, national and global* transformation.

- action and engagement rather than passive receptivity
- creative self-expression rather than one-size-fits-all assignments
- individualized self-assessment rather than multiple guess tests with one right answer
- collaborative construction of meaning through dialogue rather than lobbying for position with debate and discussion
- The professors wanted students to feel that they could make a difference, that they could change the world.

### Aim

The course they developed, '*Earth Charter: Pathway to a Sustainable Future?*' aimed to bring the abstract topic of sustainability into the classroom, using the Earth Charter as the backbone. In developing this course, the professors designed opportunities for:

- thoughtfulness and deep reflection rather than rote memorization of information

### Participants

The direct participants were the course instructors and the 26 students representing a wide variety of majors including political theory, building construction management, anthropology, urban planning, environmental studies and philosophy. The students were not familiar with the Earth Charter at the beginning of the course.

## Timeframe

This course was offered in Spring 2002. While the same course has not been offered in the same vein, the instructors have developed and taught other courses where the Earth Charter has been an important component.

## Description

### Course Design:

The course was purposefully designed as an alternative model for students, teachers and the subject to come together in a meaningful way. It was structured to meet twice a week for 1 hour and 20 minutes. The first session each week featured a speaker or group of speakers addressing a specific principle of the Earth Charter. The second class meeting of the week was a discussion session based upon the readings and the presentation earlier in the week. Each student was expected to participate in a semester-long project of engagement with the Earth Charter document and their community. The project was chronicled through the compilation of a *praxis* portfolio. In addition the students had two short reflective essays to write and attendance counted toward the grade.

In order to substantially cover the Earth Charter, the professors decided to cover the first four principles under “Respect and Care for the Community of Life” collectively as they are the values that are the foundation for the other 12. They then spent 1 week/principle for the next 12 principles.

“We’re conditioned to be linear thinkers. One can clearly teach the Earth Charter linearly, e.g., start with principle one and go through sixteen. I suspect a beginning place is to try and model the tone of the EC, i.e., incorporate care, respect, etc. into the everyday teaching process and continually inserting the neglected pieces through questions.”

Terry Link, Course Instructor

### Methods:

The use of real-world speakers (in addition to academicians) was highly successful. Invited speakers included: a social worker, two elementary school teachers, a consultant, and a leader of a peace team. They were each passionate about their work and told personal stories that made the principles come alive. The course instructors are believers in the power of the narrative, storytelling. The instructors also shared stories and poems aloud with students throughout the course to reaffirm the power and beauty of the spoken word.

### Activities:

The discussion sessions usually focused on the topic covered earlier in the week at the featured presentation. However, the instructors occasionally stepped outside that format through a checking-in process where students related what was on their mind generally at that time. They took a few occasions when the weather was supportive of going outside to meet. Ideas were characteristically challenged with respect, and differing perspectives were welcomed.

### Student Projects:

Student projects were of their own choice and students were encouraged to pick something they were passionate or deeply curious about for project areas. Students worked in school gardens, literacy programs, underprivileged tutoring programs, studied green building standards, developed recycled products lists, organized a regional collegiate conference on global warming, raised consciousness on eating meat, studied and performed with a international dance for peace effort, and so on.

Of particular note, were those students who stumbled into projects with some ambivalence, yet experienced significant impact. They learned more about themselves and the complexities of life in a much deeper fashion than the typical classroom could offer. The freedom to express their projects through different media was also a



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delightful surprise. Student presentations took the form of poster sessions and displays, a long essay, a binder loaded with reflections and photos, a couple of power-point presentations, and a video.

## **Funding**

The course was offered by Michigan State University and there was no need for external funding to make it happen.

## **Results**

The course was a success. The professors were amazed at the generally positive energy the Earth Charter stimulated. In the words of Terry Link: *“There were a number of cynics in the course, who tended to soften their cynicism somewhat as the course developed. There was one week where a presentation on hunger and the schools, led to students wanting to take on the local school board over the inadequate food programme at a nearby school. Activism typified much of the discussion and projects.*

*Yet there were clear differences among student values. The highly idealistic students learned how much more complicated their key issues were. Environmental activists learned to consider and balance the social and economic factors, while the social justice activists began to look at environmental and economic elements with more openness.”*

Perhaps one of the strongest outcomes was the effect of the course on the instructors. Students in the course encouraged the instructors to help more people become aware of the Earth Charter. In summer of 2002, several informal community meetings began discussing the Earth Charter and a small study group was formed. Subsequently the instructors have been working to build awareness through attendance at public events and by approaching organizations and religious groups to ask them to endorse the Earth Charter. This work was ongoing in 2005, under the Mid-Michigan coalition for the Earth Charter. In addition both instructors have continued working with the Earth Charter in their courses.

## **Conclusion**

According to the instructors, the Earth Charter proved to be an extremely valuable instrument in the design of the course. They felt that the power of the Earth Charter lies in its wholeness, bringing together the environmental, social, economic, and spiritual spheres into one. The Earth Charter can be taught in many different ways, such as going through the document principle by principle. However, the instructors of the course took it a few steps beyond, modelling the tone of the Earth Charter into the design and implementation of the course.

### *Sources:*

- Drawn directly from ‘A Course Review from Michigan State University’ by Terry Link.
- Earth Charter Award Application submitted by Mid-Michigan Coalition