

Earth Charter: Pathway to a Sustainable Future?

A Course Review from Michigan State University
Terry Link

Teaching sustainability is an ominous endeavor. What is it? What pedagogy might be used? How do we invite the entire community to learn together? These questions challenge us as we try to develop courses that might bring the complexity/messiness of sustainability to a diverse group of learners. It's easier to take sustainability in chunks, perhaps being moderately interdisciplinary, but without trying to be totally transdisciplinary. What department might have the whole picture of sustainability in its view? How would one even get a degree in sustainability studies? What would such a degree look like?

My colleague Dr. Laurie Thorp and I threw off the straight-jacket these tough questions wrapped us in and chose the Earth Charter as a vehicle for discussing and venturing into the ideas and ideals of sustainability. The Earth Charter www.earthcharter.org or www.earthcharterusa.org is an ethical framework for a more just, peaceful, and ecologically sound world. The Earth Charter movement was restarted in May of 1995 when the Earth Council led by Maurice Strong (Secretary General of the Earth Summit) and Green Cross International led by Mikhail Gorbachev (former President of the Soviet Union) along with the Dutch government, hosted an international meeting in The Hague. This meeting led to the organization of a global consultation process and the formation of an international drafting team. This Drafting Committee, led by Professor Steven Rockefeller, has now released the final version of the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter is the result of the global consultation process that has involved thousands of individuals and organizations. It has also received the endorsement of the international Earth Charter Commission that is composed of eminent persons from throughout the world. The international Earth Charter process is coordinated and supported by an international Secretariat at the Earth Council in Costa Rica.

The global consultation process, organized by national committees in over 40 countries, was concluded in December 1999. The Charter will now be circulated throughout the world as a 'people's treaty' promoting the awareness of and commitment to the values necessary to create a sustainable future. It will be submitted to the United Nations General Assembly for endorsement in this year and will be discussed by the global community at the Rio +10 Summit in Johannesburg in late August.

The Earth Charter is a set of principles that focus on our responsibilities to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations, as a counter-balance to our often voiced rights. These principles are formulated around four key themes:

- 1) Respect and Care for the Community of Life
- 2) Ecological Integrity
- 3) Social and Economic Justice

4) Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace

Within these four themes are sixteen principles that cover the elements Earth Charter drafters find necessary to create a sustainable future. They embody a hope, as many students in the course suggested – a utopia – to aim for. While they can be looked upon separately and distinctly, the power of the principles is in their wholeness. Needless to say, the real world presents constant situations where the principles are in conflict. The principles are not arranged in some rank order, some weighted more than others. Unlike the 10 Commandments they tell what we should do, not what we “shouldn’t do”.

COURSE DESIGN

In a semester with 15 weeks, we couldn’t simply cover a principle a week. We did do that for the last 12 principles. But we addressed 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. This allowed us to address and discuss expectations for the class, the syllabus, and to introduce the history and development of the Earth Charter without giving a whole period to either of these items.

The course was developed with a lot of thought about the appropriate pedagogy to use. As we state in the syllabus:

We believe that you cannot talk about global sustainability without including our current system of education as part of the equation. The present patterns of distanced, abstract, and objectified teaching and learning only serve to perpetuate a way of knowing and being that is detrimental to planet Earth and her inhabitants. This course has been purposefully designed as an alternative model for students, teachers and the subject to come together in a meaningful way. In developing this course we have designed opportunities for:

- thoughtfulness and deep reflection rather than rote memorization of information
- 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

This course will focus on the Earth Charter document as a vehicle for *personal, institutional, community, national and global* transformation.

The course was a three credit course meeting 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 EC. From each speaker or set of speakers we requested short recommended readings. We compiled these readings into a coursepack. 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.

One of our early dilemmas was deciding on whether to rely on local speakers or nationally recognized speakers. In an earlier course we chose principally out of town speakers which cost more money and takes a lot more time to plan for logistics, travel, lodging, etc. We also thought that perhaps that in calling predominantly outsiders in we devalue the local. The course conveners brainstormed with a small group to come up with both local and national figures who we thought could address the individual principles well. The final list was predominantly campus and local folks, including some students with only a few presenters from out of the area. Besides seeking suggested pertinent readings, speakers were urged to engage the students beyond simply lecturing on the topic.

Term projects were to be determined by the student with the approval of the instructors. We compiled a list of possibilities and contacts on campus and in the immediate community. Students could choose from the list or suggest an alternative. They were given two weeks to make a choice and to submit it to us to review over a weekend. Students were also given a set of expectations and criteria by which their involvement and recording of that involvement would be evaluated. Students needed to schedule a meeting with the instructors during the middle of the term to check on progress of the project and to seek advice and or ask questions. We thought there might be a need for reframing individual projects, or at least ensuring that progress was being made. We also spent a session talking about the criteria and listening to student voices on how to apply the criteria as we evaluated their projects.

COURSE EVALUATION

We had 26 students representing a wide variety of majors including political theory, building construction management, anthropology, urban planning, environmental studies and philosophy. We had one graduate student, but otherwise a mix of undergraduates from freshmen to seniors. No one was familiar with the Earth Charter at the beginning. After first reviewing the EC for their first assignment, it was clear that they found the principles affirming, but many found it “too utopian”. This raised an early concern for at least one of the instructors as we wanted the course to be “empowering”. We wanted students to feel like they can make a difference, that they can change the world. The concern about “too utopian” arose from folks generally feeling already cynical about the world they lived in.

The speakers gave an array of performances. Some had very polished powerpoint presentations, others relied on simple notes and some short readings. Still others organized panels, many brought questions for the students to ponder and one group developed a scenario exercise and assigned roles to all students to act out. We think the variety of presentation types was a strength of the course. Some loved the role play session, others did not. Some really enjoyed the power point presentations, others found them too formal. Several speakers were mentioned time and again as the ones most compelling. In each case it was a speaker who was actually working with the issue in the real world: 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 instructors are believers in the power of the narrative, storytelling. The responses of these students reaffirms that belief. The instructors shared stories and poems aloud with students throughout the course to reaffirm the power and beauty of the spoken word.

The power of the course was most noticeable in the student semester projects and the weekly discussion sessions. In the course evaluations these strengths were common tender. Student projects were of their own choice and we encouraged students 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, for they lived it. The freedom to express their projects through different media was also a delightful surprise. We had more typical poster sessions and displays, a long essay, a binder loaded with reflections and photos, a couple of powerpoint presentations, and a video. The presentations were generally first rate and revealing. We had the students share their projects through a “share fair” with each other on the last day of classes. Students thus got to view not only the content of the other projects, but the depth and variability of presentation modes.

The discussion sessions usually focused on the topic covered earlier in the week at the featured presentation. However, we occasionally stepped outside that format through a checking-in process where students related what was on their mind generally at that time. We took a few occasions when the weather was supportive of going outside to meet. On way day in particular, we ended up playing a children’s game in the botanical gardens. Ideas were characteristically challenged with respect, and differing perspectives were welcomed, although there was some initial reluctance to go against the “groupthink” that sometimes arose. Instructors would raise questions to probe different ideas and to challenge “groupthink”. This was less needed as the semester advanced, for the questions often came from fellow students themselves.

I was amazed at the generally positive energy the Earth Charter stimulated. 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 program 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.

The course group was small enough that personal connections were made between them, and new and deeper relationships were built. The atmosphere that was created in the classroom was among the best byproducts of the course for many students. Age and background differences enhanced the exchange in discussions as students learned to have stereotypes challenged frequently. Perhaps one of the strongest outcomes is the affect on the instructors. The present author has been inspired to promote the Earth Charter beyond the course, attempting to create a local community summit this fall. The other instructor has expanded her own work with school gardens and is creating 1 credit earth Charter course for new students next spring. Neither of these outcomes was expected. Perhaps the true power of the Earth Charter is as a fertile ground where many good things may bloom.

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