

Handbook for teaching sustainability values using the Earth Charter

By Ronald Zieger and Douglas F. Williamson

The “*Erd-Charta Praxishandbuch*” (Earth Charter Practice Handbook) is a publication by the German Earth Charter affiliate Ecumenical One World Initiative (EOWI). It is an innovative manual on how to put the spirit of the Earth Charter into practice through non-formal educational methods. The editors of the book, Anja Becker and her team from EOWI draw on many years of teaching experience to showcase the manual’s many activities and ideas.



The development of the Praxishandbuch

In mid-2102, EOWI (<http://erdcharta.de>), the organization responsible for the coordination of the Earth Charter activities in Germany, published the “*Erd-Charta Praxishandbuch*” (Earth Charter Practice Handbook), which is a complex and imaginative manual on how the principles of the Earth Charter can be successfully put into practice.

According to Anja Becker, the organization’s director, the publication’s approach seeks to overcome two shortcomings of Germany’s educational system. The first one is related to the strict separation of different subjects, which makes it difficult to consider “sustainable development as one big related topic”. The second fault is related to the traditional focus “on teaching information, instead of competencies”. Such competencies are, for example, “how to make decisions in complex ethical situations” or “an ethical view of the world and the future of life”, states Ms. Becker.

In order to teach those competencies, the *Praxishandbuch* employs a holistic approach gleaned from the many years of teaching experience of the book’s authors and editors in schools and other organizations. Over time, topics and teaching methods were adjusted and improved according to the needs and knowledge of the targeted group. As a teacher, Ms. Becker noticed quickly the many opportunities that the Earth Charter offers. She was surprised when she realized that the Earth Charter was not only suitable material for secondary and higher education, but that it also works really well “in classes with younger kids and even in schools with students with special needs”. To her, this was proof of how valuable the document can be for all kinds of educational work and how well it supports an inter- and trans-disciplinary view of global problems and the interdependencies of practically everything.

Several years ago, Ms. Becker and her colleagues started to write down the activities, workshops, modules, and methods they had developed. More recently, seeing that the amount of material had increased considerably, Ms. Becker and her team decided to compile their experiences into a book. The publication was completed with the support of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, as well as several other German and international development agencies.



Methodological aspects

Ms. Becker believes that the strength of the *Erd-Charta Praxishandbuch* is that it helps to internalize all of the sixteen Earth Charter principles through an array of new methods for teaching sustainable development. Those are:

- The students participate when it comes to the selection of the topics.
- Students learn how to find solutions together within the framework of a group.
- The focus lies on a comprehensive approach that connects different disciplines with each other.
- Special importance is put on project work. The problems and situations chosen as starting points are supposed to be as realistic as possible.
- The participants learn in a “self-directed” manner.
- Individual initiatives are enabled within groups.



These approaches are also connected with the belief that knowledge develops through an interaction of the students with their learning environment. To facilitate this approach, a variety of methods are employed, including independent learning, field trips, map exercises, scenarios, future workshops, and learning across generations, among others.

To facilitate implementing these methods, the *Praxishandbuch* is structured according to methodological modules that enable the implementation of workshops, project days, and weekend seminars. These modules are organized into four categories.

The first modules cover introductory steps such as “Speed dating” or “Barometer of opinion”, which seek to break the ice between group members and create an open, positive, and productive working environment. In the next category, methodological modules, such as “Mosaic of Opinions” or “World Politics in the Classroom”, help to deliver the means to tackle a certain subject through applying the framework of the Earth Charter. A third group of modules covers recreational activities between the actual content modules, for which Ms. Becker and her team have developed ideas such as the “Survival Island” or the “Human Knot”. Lastly, modules for closure intend to bring the workshop to a conclusion and to allow thought for future actions and behavior. Successful ideas include the “Jubilation rocket” or the “I pack my bags” game.

Using this methodology, Anja Becker explains, it is possible to develop design competencies (“Gestaltungskompetenz¹”), which she considers skills that are becoming increasingly important in a world where knowledge is aging faster and faster. Ms. Becker is confident that if people acquire design competencies, such as “empathy and joint action” or “motivating oneself as well as others in order to become active”, they would be able to actively tackle and solve the economic, ecological, and social challenges of the future. At the same time, she and her team are constantly trying to

¹ “Design competencies” is a crude translation of “Gestaltungskompetenz”, which describes the ability to recognize and use knowledge about sustainable development to identify present and future problems and challenges from ecological, economic, and social perspectives, recognize their interrelations and interconnections, and then employ that knowledge to foster sustainable outcomes. The teaching of these competencies is being used in the German education system.

develop their teaching methods further, adjusting them to specific target groups to make sure that students are getting involved on both a methodological and an emotional level.

Success stories and lessons learned

For Ms. Becker and her colleagues, the power of the *Praxishandbuch* lies in its ability to appeal to people with its holistic, creative, and interactive approach. “It is simply awesome if you see how we influence others with our workshops, which we design according to the methods described in our handbook”. She added that teachers would routinely observe and express surprise at students experiencing a kind of conversion from not having any interest to becoming very enthusiastic about the Earth Charter.

Ms. Becker has also noticed that many participants who take these workshops become more active in bringing Earth Charter principles to life. She reports that the workshops often inspire profound changes when it comes to participants’ lifestyles and have influenced participants’ career choices. “For instance” Ms. Becker recalls, “one of our students decided to dedicate her bachelor’s thesis to the Earth Charter Initiative, while another participant, a student of business administration, changed the course of her studies to sustainable development.” Furthermore, many students chose internships in non-profit organizations supporting development assistance, founded student associations at their universities, became Earth Charter ambassadors, or simply started to raise attention on global topics through social media sites like Facebook on their own.

Other organizations and teachers that have ordered the *Praxishandbuch* and started to use it in their classes have given positive feedback to Ms. Becker and her team, emphasizing the encouraging effects they were able to achieve through applying the methods. The handbook is especially beneficial for mixed age groups as well.

Particularly important for assessing the success of the *Praxishandbuch’s* teaching methods are the people who work as, what Ms. Becker calls, “knowledge multipliers”. Since 2010, 32 students have become knowledge multipliers through the educational work of EOWI. Two years after receiving their initial education, roughly half of them are still active, and two told Ms. Becker and her team that their work as knowledge multipliers has affected their lives and career choices. For instance, Robert, a young student of mathematics, learned about the work of Ms. Becker and her team on the Internet. Already a knowledge multiplier, Robert then decided to dedicate his dissertation to sustainability topics. Another, Heike, a banker and forest warden by profession, started to work in spring 2011 as a coordinator for a development campaign. Both of them represent excellent examples of the *Praxishandbuch’s* potential.

Another knowledge multiplier, a teacher from the German town Rothenburg, mentioned that one of her pupils once asked her whether they could do something related to the Earth Charter in class again. “At that moment, I realized that the topics of the Earth Charter had developed into recurring and well-positioned elements of my curriculum”, she remembers. Statements like these make Anja Becker believe that she and her team are getting a bit closer to the ultimate goal of the *Praxishandbuch*: helping people to “understand that everything is connected and that our unsustainable ways of living have detrimental consequences to the planet and other human beings.” To address these issues, she says, the Earth Charter is the ideal instrument for creating a positive vision that “really drops into your consciousness”.

