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Using an individual volunteer project to provide an innovative learning and assessment experience in the field of sustainability

Abstract

Sustainability is a relatively young field which in the past decade, has seen increased media coverage, employment opportunities and student interest. 'Principles of Environmental Sustainability' is a Masters Level module whose innovative curriculum delivery features a complement of active learning methods and constructively aligned assessments. These are designed to engage students through practice to apply theories that address challenges of a societal shift to sustainability. This paper outlines how an individual volunteer project provides a learning environment that encourages both the social and academic integration of a diverse student group. Details of the assessment strategy and methods for providing formative feedback through self and peer evaluation are explained.

Introduction

Student satisfaction with assessment, and in particular with feedback that supports learning development, continues to be reported as significantly less positive compared with other areas of the student experience. In response (as outlined on p72 and 73 of this edition of Planet), the National Union of Students (NUS) has published ten principles of good feedback practice (NUS, 2008) that aim to make assessment fundamental 'to' and 'for' learning and includes points about timely and continuous feedback with opportunities for self and peer evaluation. Importantly, the early student experience of assessment has been found to be significant in student attrition. Krause (2005, p60) highlights that students "*who tend to keep to themselves at university are more likely to consider dropping out than those who work with other students on assignments*

and make contact with their peers out of class — whether online or face-to-face". This paper outlines how an assignment based on an individual volunteer project offers staff and peers on a taught Masters course the opportunity for collaborative approaches to assessment.

Course details

'Principles of Environmental Sustainability', is one of two core modules for the MSc in Sustainability and Management, a cross-faculty full time 1 year programme jointly run by the School of Management and the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. Unlike the other core modules run in the autumn term, 'Principles' consists of 20 x 3 hour sessions convened in both terms. The module explores the linkages between environmental, socio-political and economic issues in modern society. In the rapidly evolving field of sustainability, a key aim is to equip students with the analytical skills and ability to apply theories to issues that they will encounter in the future. (See Box 1 for the learning outcomes of the course.) By the end of the module, students are expected to be knowledgeable about key theories pertaining to environmental governance for sustainability, and understand how these theories are relevant for developing practical approaches to manage contrasting environmental and human resources.

Course Learning Outcomes

- **Identify the scientific, legal and political basis for sustainable governance of resources**
- **Assimilate and critically evaluate current research and demonstrate originality of interpretation in written and oral arguments**
- **Apply principles of governance for sustainability to analyse how society interacts with environment and the effects on environmental processes and functions**
- **Identify and devise different approaches to governance for sustainability suitable for a range of resources (water, air, land, biodiversity) at varied spatial scales (local, regional, national, international) in different locations**

Box 1: Course learning outcomes.

Curriculum

The curriculum was designed to include a range of active learning methods and constructively aligned (Biggs, 2003) assessments which would engage students, through practice, to apply theories that address the challenges of a societal shift to sustainability. The active learning curriculum includes case studies, interactive role-play, inclusion of different socio-cultural contexts, integration of student-selected examples, an urban sustainability field-trip, on-line discussion forum and the individual volunteer project. These were designed to enhance student learning and employability, and to integrate diverse perspectives.

In 2005 the assessment was amended from 50/50 coursework/exam to 100% coursework. The module constitutes a 25% contribution to the overall programme assessment. The aim was to align assessment methods with the active learning delivery (see Dengler, 2008). The assessments include a diversified portfolio of coursework assignments; two essays (60%), a book review (5%), a field trip report (5%), a reflective essay (10%), and the individual volunteer project report (20%).

Individual student volunteering project

The individual volunteer project is an assignment (see Box 2) that requires students to actively engage with a stakeholder group that is central to the practice of sustainability in society. Most of the students have a first degree in business and many have never

volunteered before. This is particularly true of international students, who normally constitute more than 60% of the class. Each student is required to volunteer for a minimum of 24 hours with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) of personal interest that pertains to an aspect of sustainability. Many students exceed this minimum requirement.

Individual volunteer project assignment

- **Complete risk assessment**
- **250 word summary of the project**
- **Notebook log**
- **Formative presentation to peers**
- **Project report (2000 - 2500 words)**
- **A letter of reference from the NGO**
- **A volunteer hours record sheet**

Box 2: Individual volunteer project assignment.

Students are required to identify their own organisation independently. Part of their learning process is to explore the different ways that the NGO can benefit from an aspect of sustainability in the community and to find a project of personal interest, which also caters for the diversity amongst the students. This individualisation of the project provides further pedagogic benefit for enhancing student learning, as they have the opportunity to learn about other projects when the students provide periodic updates on their work through presentations. The originality and personalisation of the assignment means it would be extremely difficult to plagiarise the final written report and is a constructive counter-plagiarism measure (Carroll, 2007).

Individual project report

When selecting an organisation and when engaged in the volunteer work, students are asked to reflect on how their practical work relates to theories explored in class, and ultimately they submit a 2000-2500 word report where they focus on how their experiences relate to class themes. In the report, students are asked to focus on reflections about what they have learnt and how their volunteer experience relates to wider debates about governance for sustainability, including debates about social and environmental justice (see Box 3). There is a clear expectation that the work is informed by, and explicitly linked with, the relevant literature.

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Students are advised that their individual project report should include

1. a brief account of volunteer work
2. spend more space reflecting on experiences, what was learned and how this volunteer work relates to wider debates on governance for sustainability, including debates about social and environmental justice
3. letter of reference from supervisor at the volunteer organisation
4. record card of volunteer hours signed by student and supervisor
5. volunteer log which includes ongoing report of activities and reflections

Box 3: Project report checklist.

Formative feedback

Research is consistent in highlighting the immensely positive effect of formative feedback on student learning (Black and Williams, 1998). In order for feedback to be effective in helping the student to improve in the future, ‘feed-forward’ needs to be timely, continuous and incremental (Hughes and Boyle, 2005). During the project, students are required to undertake discrete formative tasks that not only demonstrate progress, but also offer the opportunity to receive prompt feedback that will benefit their learning and contribute to their final assessment.

Risk assessment: Before volunteering, students complete a risk assessment, which is supported through a group tutorial. This task proved challenging for many students to complete without guidance.

Project summary: A 250 word project summary must be submitted by the middle of term one. Formative comments are returned to students within two weeks.

Interim presentation of ongoing work: At the end of term one students are asked to make a five minute presentation about ongoing work with their volunteer project. This provides feedback to the students about their own project, but crucially allows them to learn from each other. Astin’s findings (1996) identify peer involvement in collaborative activities as a strong factor in learning.

Class discussion forum: Students have the opportunity to discuss aspects of the volunteer project on the class discussion forum on Moodle. This use of virtual space is an important element in helping to cultivate a sense of community amongst the cohort and helps meet the needs of a range of learners. Quieter contributors, which may include international, Asian-origin, female students, initially contribute more on-line rather than through speaking in class.

Notebook log: Keeping a volunteer log is a component of the assignment that helps students to chart the progress of their activities and reflections about them. More generally, this ongoing writing exercise assists students in improving their written skills, which is particularly important for some international students where English is a second or third language. This further aids students to produce the final summative report.

Final formative presentation: At the end of term two, students make a 5 minute presentation about their completed volunteer project in advance of preparing their summative reports, which are submitted at the beginning of term three.

The volunteer project was designed to engage with NGOs, with the 2008 NGO representatives invited to attend the presentations.

Student evaluation

While students can be sceptical initially, by the end of the year many students mention the volunteer project as one of their favourite aspects of the module. Students note how they have learned about the challenges of putting sustainability into practice at a local scale.

“What we were studying was not only in books but in reality as well.”

For international students, the volunteer project provides them with an opportunity to interact with local British residents, establishing links to the wider community and enabling them to improve their spoken English. Many of the Chinese students comment that they enjoy meeting people in the local community, who were very welcoming and that people in England like to take breaks for tea, which they found to be surprisingly similar to China.

“I found the volunteering work also can help me to meet many people and make friends with them, such as my manager and some colleagues and even some familiar customers.”

Students reflect that their home country does not have a parallel volunteer organisation infrastructure, and that as a result of their projects they are considering how charity shops or recycling programmes can be transferred to their home countries.

“I did not know what an NGO was before [and] now I can see how they offer many benefits to society. I think that China should have NGOs and I would like to be involved in volunteering when I return [to China]”

Many of the students seek employment in the corporate sector and, increasingly, NGOs are partnering with corporations. The volunteer project provides all students with the opportunity to understand more about how charitable organisations work and may encourage them to further linkages between corporations and NGOs in the future.

“The compulsory individual volunteer project at Christian Aid UK was an exciting experience for me as I was able to experience governance in practice.”

In 2007–2008, 34 students exceeded the minimum requirement and the class total was 986 volunteer hours. In 2008–2009, 25 students volunteered a total of 1024 hours.

Future directions

The volunteer project component of the course has been further developed through funding from the College’s Research & Enterprise unit to organise a ‘Celebration of Sustainability Volunteering’ event in spring 2009 where short-listed students presented projects to compete for prizes. All students contributed a poster of their project to the event and competed for a prize for the best poster by thematic categories. Judges were from local companies and supervisors from the volunteer organisations. Members of the wider college community and alumni were invited, thus enabling students networking opportunities with the local community.

Summary

The individual community volunteer project engages students actively with an issue of sustainability, encourages reflection on that involvement, and provides an opportunity to share the experience and to learn about diverse examples from their peers. As a result of the project, students have an enhanced understanding of how an NGO works, preparing them to be involved in future partnerships. Integration of this activity into the curriculum offers practical learning benefits, enhances students’ transferable skills and improves their employability. At a minimum, each of the MSc graduates can add a volunteer experience to their CV. Because students have been asked to reflect on how the NGO relates to their chosen Masters field, they are also better positioned to respond to job interview questions that draw linkages between sustainability in theory and practice.

While integrating a volunteer project into all degree programmes is not practical, the transferable lessons from this project are that innovative methods of teaching and assessment can be integrated with pedagogic benefit to enhance student learning. In summary:

“The compulsory individual volunteer project at Christian Aid UK was an exciting experience for me as I was able to experience governance in practice.”

‘I emphasise that the students can each contribute unique and valuable perspectives from their varied life experiences. This approach fosters students to respect others and themselves as people whose ideas matter and can be problem solvers for the shared issues of sustainability.’

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