

## **Business and Sustainability: A shared experience**

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### *Abstract proposal*

One of the aims of university education is to prepare young people to be responsible citizens for the future. In the business world, the notion of sustainability is increasingly recognised as an important agenda. Both the Higher Education Funding Council (2008) and the Quality Assurance Agency (2014) acknowledge the critical role of higher education in educating socially responsible and ethically aware graduates. In line with this trend, many business schools have responded by offering sustainability related subjects and exploring pedagogical tools for engagement. Developing sustainability literacy (Stibbe 2011), shifting mindsets (Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008), developing critical thinking skills (Brookfield, 2011) and creating significant learning experiences for students (Dee Fink 2003) are just some examples of approaches which have proved successful. However, such initiatives and the concept of sustainability itself pose some difficult educational challenges for both educators and students.

This paper explores the impact of an innovative module on business and sustainability entitled Develop Sustainable Enterprises which is offered as an option to second year students in the Business School at Canterbury Christ Church University. This is the second year that the module has run and sixty five students elected to participate. Evidence of impact has been gathered (a) using a pre and post module questionnaire; (b) through the 'voices' of four students who have responded to the module in different ways. Tutor reflections provide an additional viewpoint. The student contributions make this an unusual and strongly grounded presentation which will illustrate a shared experience between students and tutor on a learning journey. (252 words)

### *References:*

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## **Business and Sustainability: A shared experience.**

Together with my students I have been exploring the concepts of business and sustainability and their implications for management and organisations on a second year option module: Developing Sustainable Enterprises. The range of challenges posed by sustainability (climate change, resource constraints, social and environmental issues) confronting business and society are broad and complex; there are no easy solutions. Having the capacity to address the unstructured challenges would be critical for the future, but the challenge for a business educator is how best to engage students with these issues. This is one of the most vexing question in my experience as there appears to be no 'one best way'.

My review of the literature on teaching sustainability has revealed a number of pedagogic options. These range from developing factual knowledge, sustainability literacy (Stibbe 2011) to paradigm shift (Sterling 2012). Writers such as Banerjee (2004) advocates teaching sustainability from a critical perspective. Dee Fink (2003), on the other hand, suggests creating significant learning experiences that are meaningful and of values to the learners. There are also suggestions as to whether sustainability should be integrated into the main stream curriculum (Painter-Morland et al 2016).

My approach to teaching draws on ideas from the above writers, but with some adaptation to suit the student profiles. In the process of implementation, I encounter many practical challenges, such as issues relating to capacity building, participant engagement, policies and processes.

Despite the challenges, I was interested in finding out the impact of studying the module had on students thinking and behaviour. I conducted a pre-module survey to gauge student preconceptions of sustainability. Regular dialogue and the end of module reflection indicated changes in their responses, but I am mindful of the fact that some impacts may not be immediate and may take time to realise.

### **Description of the presentation dialogue**

I am very privileged to have three students here to share their experiences of the learning with us. Outline below is a description of the presentation dialogue.

#### **Sadie Barton**

This is only the second time I have actually given a presentation. I have just finished my second year in Sustainable Business with Eng. When I first started I thought a bit like well this is pointless, it's not going to make a difference. You just get a bit angry with everything she is telling you. You just have no power to change anything. So you just sit there and say anything with this face on you. And then she said right, go and have a look at *Whole Earth?* So we got up and we walked around and I thought my God! You know there are so many things you can change because I have a job I am a cleaner. While I may not save the world, I might change my little community.

So with this, I went from the *Whole Earth?* exhibition and I went to India where I met Mark and he kind of connected everything and I felt my brain was going crazy. I thought yeah I can do this. So I went green. Eco friendly products. Low juice and anything that's not harmful. Going from that. I don't eat meat any more. My last meat dinner, that was Christmas and that was it. My waste has just gone to nothing. Things like J cloths, I just don't use J cloths there use E cloths that you can get. I thought they were not very hygienic but put them in a washing machine they're fine.

Personally my changes have been huge from realising the things I can change and being in house share as well with four students they join in as and when they can. *'Come and eat this. It's got no meat in it and they love it.'* Turning the lights off.

What are their issues? So me I was really I was really angry. And the next module is business ethics which I don't think covers everything we've done in sustainability. But I think if I didn't study this I still be cleaning in the same way with the same products same attitudes. And I come from Thanet as well, so it's all very well to have fancy ideas(laughter)... yeah. This module has really been amazing. Its changed my life and everything I do.

(Sadie shows website)

(Eng: But you do more than just cleaning you also help your clients as well)

In 2009 I was made redundant from two jobs and I was thinking right what am I going to do and I kept on applying and applying and being knocked down. You know I said I am just going to do it myself and everything will be fine. Get insurance. This is Bernard. I've been visiting him three times a week since 2009. He's like my adopted granddad right now. I don't just do the cleaning. I have other girls who go out with me and I kind of take the care side. I make sure that all the customers eat OK, they are paying the bills, their home is clean. I kind of take the green approach to them as well. I do their shopping and kind of change things. They prefer it. They say, buy this buy that, but I just sneak it in. The people that I go to, they will have other carers as well. And they say, *Oh where does this come from?* and they phone me up and *What are you doing now?*. I am not very good with words but I go and show them.

And my best example. I go to the gym three times a week – I do sports studies as well so I am physically fit. I went to the doctor and I was really struggling to breathe. And he said what do you do for a job? And I said I was a cleaner and he said you're going to have to turn an ??? please wear a mask when you're cleaning and I thought oh my god! Now I am lot more happier in what I am doing. And hopefully I have an impact on everyone else around me.

### **Susan Braga**

I am a second year business studies student and just finished the sustainability course. As you can imagine, Eng is really passionate about what she teaches and it just trickles down to everybody. And about the males. I think they thought they would just have an easy ride. But it wasn't. Because in conversations with them they said its changed the way I am thinking. Although they won't talk about it in class this is the impression I get. I think that's brilliant

I am a mature student and my cultural background is different. I was brought up in India. The whole module took me back to my culture, to my roots and my way of thinking. That was:

- 1) First of all be grateful that you have a life, that you are living.
- 2) The Earth is a goddess. Look after her because if you don't you'll feel the impact.
- 3) You have social responsibility. make sure you give back to your community.

And we have to because when we did our GCSEs and A levels we had to do charity work. We had to go out into the community. We had to entertain old people, we had to mend fences. We had to volunteer for an orphanage for example and things like that. This was all forgotten and then I came to the UK ten years ago. And then I did this and it all sort of came back to me. And then I realised the importance of what you have inside you which is your natural intelligence and that's so, so very

important. And who you are because we do a lot of the traditional stuff in a business course and profit making and that's important.

And on the other hand what's more important is because business is so dynamic and that is exactly what sustainability is its always changing, and you need to get out of the traditional route and think of something different. And that's very, very hard in today's world as well so when you go out there you've got people there who are struggling with their narrow mindset and that's the biggest challenge. They'll give you a hundred arguments why you're wrong and they're right. And that's not the way forward. For me it's that life is changing, sustainability is out there it is the basis of what we are and what we do. Sustainability is what we are and what we are. Because we are part of the outside and the outside is part of the inside.

So this is what's done for me and I blame Eng for it! That's just the way I am and the way I am and the way forward for me to more and more in tune with who I am and to get my inspiration from the inside and not to be conditioned by what the outside world is like at the moment and just go through with it. and not to give up. And that's my own personal journey and that's what I've learnt.

### **Brian Masindo**

My name is Brian Masindo. I am a resident of Zimbabwe. I did this module last year and I am currently on a placement as an information analyst in social enterprise I am an intern there.

When I did this module it prompted me to think – or to rethink - the whole meaning of value, especially in a business context. Is value the function of the balance sheet or its effect of environment and community. Or maybe it's a combination of all three. And if it is a combination of all three in what proportions and what do we then have to focus on?

But fortunately mother nature has a blue print for this model. There is a story of tree that sprung into a forest by having to reproduce itself. some of the branches grow towards the sky and some them grow towards the ground to create a new trunk – a continuous process - and wherever it rooted itself in the ground it created a new axis with all the bugs and birds but it never really sacrificed the other trees that had been created and it sprang into whole forest And this probably is the next business model we need to implement. However, having been an interim in a social enterprise there are lot of big challenges.

The first challenge we encountered expertise. The kind of expertise which is required for this kind of business model are being attracted by other industries. Because of the price tag or the remuneration tag on this expertise is very huge. Most of the social enterprises won't have this kind of expertise to help them facilitate this kind of model. So one of the biggest challenges I believe is the kind of expertise that we have.

The second challenge I believe is around the whole economy around the social and economic and environmental part of the business. If you think of the triple bottom line – profit, people and planet. The people and planet, the economics around that a planned economy. its moved away from typical supply and demand mechanisms that take place. Because it is so flat it is unsustainable. So basically, those two areas of the triple bottom line usually get all their money from funding and funding usually fluctuates in how much you get and sometimes it dries up. So having businesses which follow through the triple bottom line is very difficult. We need individuals to find ways to bring all three aspects together and put them in a classical supply and demand model. Does that make sense?

The other challenge is also about the current business environment that we have and what it focuses on. Where monetary value itself is how business is valued. The size of the balance sheet. We have to re-think, do we equate value to price or do we equate value to something else?

And lastly because businesses are essentially constituted of individuals, individuals that have concepts that build business model. It's not going to take one individual to actually change the landscape, it will take a whole generation with new concepts to change whole landscapes. Move out to the work place and business world with concepts and new models. And this generation I believe has to come from universities where you guys are going to have to instil those values into those individuals. As they move off to the business world with new concepts that is really going to make a difference.

### **Summary of the key points:**

1. Wide range of variables (cultural backgrounds, values, engagement) influence student responses to the learning experiences
2. Use of exhibition to engage and to empower learners to construct personal meaning of sustainability
3. Students recognise the importance of learning about sustainability-related issues as part of their general education
4. The value orientation of the facilitator in teaching sustainability
5. The capacity of the participants to reflect on their own values and experiences, and to make links with the learning
6. The question of Value in a business context
7. The challenge of embedding sustainability based on conventional business assumptions and practices

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