



Sustainable Learning in 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands

Andrea Church*

Grant MacEwan University, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article is a case scenario with interviews from students in 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands. The students are enrolled in a business or “Entrepreneur’s” program at Koning Willem I College. Part of their program involves a sales initiative project during which they are responsible for designing a campaign to sell umbrellas. The students receive lessons from Drs. Rob de Vrind, an expert on sustainability and resource management. De Vrind teaches sustainability to the students under the heading of “citizenship,” which is taught by two program instructors. Five students participated in the interview process. While their project is in the beginning stages, they are enthusiastic about learning more about the connection between good business practices and sustainability. Background information about the educational system in the Netherlands, as well as information about the College’s business program is provided.

Background

Education and learning are lifelong pursuits. Formal and informal learning shape and support the acquisition of knowledge by students. Integrating critical information into the curriculum can be challenging for most universities and colleges. The topic of sustainability is one such area of human understanding that has warranted considerable

discussion regarding teaching and learning approaches. Incorporating the topic of sustainability within curriculum requires innovative, creative, and unique methods to develop a deeper context of this complex subject. This is precisely what the administrators and faculty have successfully accomplished at the Koning Willem I College in 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands. Sustainability has been integrated into the College programs by Drs. Rob de Vrind – “who works collaboratively with the faculty members and the students by advising them on innovative projects, by teaching sustainability as a guest lecturer in various classes, and by facilitating local, national, and international learning opportunities for students so that they can discuss, create, and disseminate information about sustainable living” (Mazo, 2011).

Purpose

In May 2011, Andrea Church (4th-year student) and Lucille Mazo, (faculty) from the communication program at Grant MacEwan University, Canada travelled to 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands to speak with faculty and students at the Koning Willem I College about their approach to integrating sustainability within their curriculum, as well as to gain an understanding regarding the students' perspectives on the topic of sustainability. With permission from faculty and students, individual and small focus group interviews were organized and conducted. Their time and resource commitment to this project were appreciated. This article provides information about the College, as well as a summary of the student interviews.

This research focused on sustainable learning in students from the Koning Willem I College (Figure 1) who currently study in the Business Academy (Ondernemersacademie) and who have completed their first year of an International Business Studies (Bol) program entitled Entrepreneur International Trade/Wholesale, BTEC: National Diploma in Business. Students learn management, marketing, human resources, and English. “The program uses projects, e-learning, international visiting professors, guest speakers, and company visits as innovative approaches to the educational process” (Koning Willem I College, 2011). Sustainability is one of their topics, situated under the category of Citizenship. According to the Brundtland



Figure 1: Koning Willem I College

Report (1987), Sustainable Development is development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Angelique Lansu, 2010). Koning Willem I College is an excellent example of how a new generation of students are being introduced to the important principles of sustainable development.

The Educational System and the College

The Netherlands’ post-secondary system is similar to Canada’s in that both consist of a Bachelor Degree, Master Degree, and Ph.D., or Doctorate degree. “The Netherlands has a binary system of higher education, which means there are two types of programmes: research-oriented education (*wetenschappelijke onderwijs, wo*), traditionally offered by research universities, and professional higher education (*hogere beroepsonderwijs, hbo*), traditionally offered by *hogescholen*, or universities of applied sciences” (Nuffic, 2009). Canada’s system of universities, colleges, and trade schools is similar, though may be less arbitrary for the students. Koning Willem I is the first community college in the country. “It provides a wide variety of occupational programs and courses, ranging from technical IT and business programs, to courses in economics, healthcare, welfare, sports, architecture, design, fashion, theatre, and multimedia” (Koning Willem I College, 2011).



Campus Sustainable Initiatives

Koning Willem I is a sustainable campus in downtown 's-Hertogenbosch. “The College is a member of UNESCO’s Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Division” (Mazo, 2011), and participates in a variety of sustainable initiatives including an organic garden, composting, recycling program, unique water system, and power reduction system. The garden consists of rows of herbs that run parallel to lettuce, peas, carrots, and various root vegetables. The produce is used on the menu by the school’s cafeteria. Waste from the cafeteria is composted and used on the garden. The students learn about the importance of using and buying locally grown produce, and enjoy the healthier food they eat as a result. The cafeteria is run by the Restaurateur’s students. They are studying to learn how to open their own restaurants. The program allows them to learn about all aspects; the cooking, the planning, and the financial details. They create the menus, prepare the food, and use the experience they gain as they move on to start their own businesses or restaurants after they graduate (de Vrind, 2011).

The College also boasts a recycling program for cans and bottles as well as glass. There are initiatives concerned with power consumption, and the lights are turned off when a room is not in use. The bathrooms only have one tap, cold water; so, the College does not pay to heat hot water for every bathroom. Natural lighting is used whenever possible, and de Vrind is researching the idea of placing a cover over the windows to help regulate temperature in the summer and prevent heat loss in the winter.

But, it takes a lifetime to educate, understand, and apply sustainability within one's environment. The College recognizes this continuous journey of learning and responds to the need to educate a new generation of students by ensuring that sustainability is integrated within its curriculum. "Lifelong learning is especially relevant in the context of learning for sustainable development. The high complexity of the professional field and the quick turnover of knowledge and insights make learning on a continual basis necessary" (Angelique Lansu, 2010). A current example of how sustainability is part of the College's curriculum and teaching is described in the next section.

A Case Scenario of Sustainability in Action with Students and Faculty —a collaborative learning approach

Students stream into the Koning Willem I College in 's-Hertogenbosch. Some are arriving for a nine o'clock lecture from Drs. de Vrind. He is a well-known figure in 's-Hertogenbosch and the Netherlands; he teaches sustainability to the students at the College and is recognized for his books, projects, and government work in sustainability and resource management.

The lecture is the second in a series of lessons that the students will receive on sustainability; it falls under the branch of "citizenship" within the Business Academy. Ms. Gonnie van Aggelen and Mrs. Verbruggen are principle instructors within this program and are responsible for teaching, guiding, and working with the students. Both are dedicated to their students' success. Twelve males and eight females fill this first year class. De Vrind lectures briefly about the basics of sustainability employing a dynamic teaching style and an interesting slideshow, and then divides the class into male and female teams. He administers an evaluation in the form of a competition to test the knowledge base of the students on the topic of sustainability. The competition ends with a draw because class has finished.

Afterwards, a meeting is arranged with Mrs. Verbruggen to join her class from 2:00-3:30 p.m. to interview the students about their program and their thoughts on sustainability. Five students agree to participate in the focus groups.

The Students' First Year Program Project

The students are eager to participate in the focus groups and to explain the details of their major project in the first year of their Entrepreneur International Trade/Wholesale program. It is impressive that they have decided to become entrepreneurs. The project for their first year is to learn the basics of running a business. This is a significant challenge and commitment for the students; they have used their own money to purchase merchandise for a project where they must make a profit. Umbrellas are not the first products to think about when one is talking about sustainability, but this is what the students are expected to sell. They buy the umbrellas wholesale for twenty Euros each, and then must sell them for thirty. Profits are divided between the students, the College, and a charity of the students' choice. KiKa is the chosen beneficiary; it is a children's charity organization. "KiKa (children with cancer) raises funds that benefit the seven paediatric cancer centers in the Netherlands" (KIKa, 2007). Forty percent of the profits go to the school, forty to the students' groups, and twenty to the charity.

There are three different types of umbrellas from which the students can select: one has flowers that appear when the material gets wet. One student figures that they will market that one to women. The second one has a specially-designed flexible frame so that it will not break in heavy winds, and the third is very strong. This one is going to be marketed to golfers. It sounds like a challenge, but will be a good test for the students. Success in the project demonstrates their commitment to the program and their ability to assess marketability and to find clients. Success is also measured by their ability to consider and apply the principles of sustainability as they plan their marketing strategies for their project. One student explains that the Netherlands has advanced ideas for sales and business – they are looking for bulk sales, and have some interesting ideas about marketing to car companies, and supermarkets.

Students' Perspectives on Sustainability and Learning

The students all agreed that sustainability was an important aspect of living. When asked what sustainability meant to them, the answers varied ranging from personal responsibility to the environment, to adhering to the child labour laws that promote a

more sustainable marketplace and lifestyle in other parts of the world, to finding solutions that reduce energy consumption. Summaries of their perspectives, ideas, and understandings of how and why sustainability needs to be part of learning, living, and business are included below.

What does sustainability mean to you?

The concept of “sustainability” varied among the students. One of the students believed that it meant there was no child labour in the world. This student also saw sustainability as a process that allowed one to look and think about the future. Four of the students agreed that people needed to pay attention to the use of natural resources such as gas and water. Two of these four students also believed that it was about being mindful of the gas, energy, and water that people consumed. A final student added to this description of sustainability, explaining that it was about finding new solutions to do everyday tasks. He further explained that society needed to look at bio industries for mass production, solar power, and wind energy.

How do you include sustainability in your everyday and school life?

Two students listed several sustainable life choices that they integrate into their daily routines including recycling, separating waste, turning off lights and power, taking short showers, eating organic eggs and meat, and using local products. Initially, one student explained that she didn’t do anything really that was sustainable, but then she realized that things like separating plastics, taking the bus, and being vegetarian counted. One of the five students explained that he separates plastics, takes the bus, and also eats more vegetables than meat, while a second one believed that people should care more about what products they use and the waste they leave behind. He wants them to be aware of water, gas, and electricity consumption. He personally uses a lower power setting for his laptop screen, rides his bike, takes the train, and walks.

What sustainable initiatives exist on your campus?

Two of the students identified solar panels, energy mirror, and a windmill for school, as well as recognized public transport, educational courses, and the separation of plastics as other initiatives that are being implemented on their campus. Two of the five students added to this list by identifying the plastic separation bins on the campus that help to reduce the amount of waste found in the trash cans. One student explained that “You can turn off the lights, the cafeteria has cheaper healthy food, and there are no snacks before 10 a.m.”

What sustainable projects have you been involved in this year?

Two of the students have both learned from their classes on sustainability and have incorporated their new knowledge into their umbrella project. This sustainability initiative is supported by one of the student's father who owns a sustainable shop that sells green products such as solar panels, solar toys, kitchen products, and environmentally friendly makeup. The three other students also cited their work at school – the umbrella project—as a project that considers sustainability as an important part of their planning process.

What research was involved in developing and shaping your project? What methods have you used to gather information for your project?

One student explained, “It’s a first year business project that was assigned to us, in the third year we will set up as entrepreneurs. We meet every week and change positions every week until we find out who works best in each role.” While another student added that they have spoken to some big companies, supermarkets, and car dealerships to see if they want to carry the umbrellas. One other student cited the internet, producers, experts, and books on marketing as resources she used to research her project. Two of the students also added business and sustainability classes to this list of sources that inform them about their project.

Do you see your project going beyond this initial stage?

Two of the students explained that if the project was very successful they would go further with it since they are excited about working on it. Another student would like to see the results of the project before deciding on the next stage. The two other students are not considering any future extension of the project, with other options being considered.

The students were approachable and honest in their responses, as they explained how sustainability affected their lives and their learning. It was clear that they were well-versed in and highly aware of the impact that sustainable campus initiatives had on their learning at the Koning Willem I College.

Conclusion

Education is a very individual experience. “Because each learner will start from his or her own unique perspective – having different prior knowledge, in different learning domains, and from different professional experience – the actual learning trajectories will vary among students” (Angelique Lansu, 2010). The students who are studying in the Business Academy have two years in which to learn about sustainability in business, marketing, and in their own lives. De Vrind, as a representative of UNESCO at Koning Willem I College uses his knowledge and experience to bring forward projects and initiatives for the students at the College. The *Meeting on Water HBO-MBO UNESCO* conference in April 2011 showcased various research projects from students in different educational institutes across the Netherlands; some of those projects were undertaken by the College’s students (Mazo, 2011). It is more than likely by the second year of their program that some of these students will also go on to focus their work and futures on sustainable business.

**Author: Andrea Church is completing her fourth year in the Bachelor of Applied Communications in Professional Writing Program at Grant MacEwan University, Canada. She loves the outdoors and recently managed a two-day bike trip down the Rhine while vacationing in Germany. She is an avid scuba diver and loves to photograph marine life in situ.*

References

- Angelique Lansu, J. B.-M. (2010). Learning in Networks for Sustainable Development. *7th International Conference on Networked Learning*, (pp. 249-256).
- KIKA. (2007). *Home*. Retrieved July 29, 2011, from <http://www.kika.nl/>
- Koning Willem I College. (n.d.). *Visie op Onderwijs*. Retrieved May 24, 2011, from Koning Willem I College 's-Hertogenbosch: <http://www.kw1c.nl/Organisatie%20&%20Visie/visieoponderwijs.htm>
- Mazo, L. (2011). Champion of Nature, Sustainability, and Education. *Earth Common* , 1-8.

Nuffic (2009). Higher education system in the Netherlands. Retrieved August 7, 2011, from <http://www.nuffic.nl/international-students/dutch-education/education-system>