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From information to empowerment: Teaching sustainable business development by enabling an experiential and participatory problem-solving process in the classroom



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present a teaching concept by which students develop a solution to one concrete challenge posed by the SDGs via a structured participatory process. The aim of the concept is twofold. First, to create an active learning process in which students move from being informed about the pressing challenges described by the SDGs, i.e., from a mere passive-learning setting to developing possible solutions on their own. Second, it aims to provide students with a concrete tool by which they can implement a participatory process in their future professional endeavours. For this, a five-level teaching concept – the Public Participation Spectrum (PPS) developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) – was used as structural framework. Our proposed concept is based on a thorough literature review on teaching sustainability to business students, and on a case study about a pilot course implemented with undergraduate students. In the pilot course, the content-related objectives could be achieved satisfactorily. However, after evaluating the extended feedback given by the students and the experience of the teacher, it seemed obvious that the applied collaborative learning experience among peers and the cooperation with external stakeholders needs to be specifically addressed and enhanced.

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the United Nations remind us that the most pressing challenges posed by extreme poverty and destitution can only be solved through the combined contributions of all sectors of society, including private business (United Nations, 2016a). However, achieving the active participation of private business actors is not an easy task. According to a global scale survey of ca. 3,500 executives conducted by McKinsey, there is a clear commitment for sustainability and responsible leadership among them. But while executives increasingly acknowledge their responsibilities as business leaders in society, they still struggle to cope effectively and strategically with some of the most pressing social and environmental challenges (McKinsey and Co, 2014).

What are the qualities and skills future management will need to address and master the role of business in changing societies? Integrity and self-efficacy may be needed increasingly. Ability and skills like critical, creative thinking, the ability to communicate and to manage complexity will be very sought after skills, as well as the ability to collect, extract and present

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information (Painter-Morland et al., 2016). Business education thus needs to question its ability to contribute to these future needs of management and the capability to participate in change (Audebrand, 2010; Du, Su, & Liu, 2013; Painter-Morland et al., 2016). Moreover, research in this topic stresses the importance of collaborative competencies, i.e. those that include the ability to engage effectively with experts and stakeholders, especially by facilitating participatory research and collaborative decision-making (Barth, Godemann, Rieckman, & Stoltenberg, 2007; Sipos, Battisti, & Grimm, 2008; de Haan, 2006). Brundiars, Wiek, and Redman (2010) further emphasise that “the motive for solving sustainability problems stems from a sense of solidarity with people and the natural environment. It is difficult to imagine making the effort necessary to accomplish the goals of sustainability in the absence of that motive” (p. 310).

Following these premises, the aim of this paper is to present a teaching concept by which students are guided in a process that will enable them to develop exemplary solutions to one concrete challenge posed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – namely SDG #1: poverty alleviation – via a participatory procedure. The objectives of a course in which this concept is applied can be twofold. First, to create an active learning process in which students move from being informed about the pressing challenges described by the SDGs, i.e., from a mere passive-learning setting, to developing possible solutions on their own. For this, the developed five-level teaching concept will apply an experiential problem-based learning approach.

Second, this concept aims to provide students with a concrete tool by which they can implement a participatory process in their future professional endeavours. In educational systems and institutions, teachers and students can be considered as part of an interconnected network of stakeholder relationships — working collaboratively and thereby effecting and influencing each other. While the agreed upon outcome of a teaching process, the ‘objective’ may not have been developed ‘jointly’, there still is a mutually agreed upon learning objective in higher educational systems for each course. And not only are the students stakeholders in their relationships to teachers, they also serve as stakeholders on a peer level, able to effect and influence each other. Hence, it is possible to enact a participatory stakeholder engagement process in class.

Concerning this aspect, we chose to base our concept on the ‘Public Participation Spectrum’ (PPS), a participatory stakeholder engagement¹ process developed and proposed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). The IAP2 is an international organisation actively supporting research and professional development training and services. It has developed a five-step-model of interaction to enhance improved decision-making in participatory processes.² The PPS has been originally designed for participatory processes in policy-making. It consists of five levels of engagement: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower. Public Participation is a practical approach to reach jointly agreed-upon outcomes considering heterogeneous interests of diverse groups or individuals. This concept refers to the involvement of those potentially affected by a decision, activity or project to understand and consider their interests. While it is seen as a method to involve stakeholders who are affected by a decision in the decision-making process, it is also used to co-create and promote viable and sustainable outcomes.

Our paper is structured as follows: The first part of the paper describes our findings of the literature review on teaching sustainability in business schools and universities. We will also briefly discuss the role of the business sector in poverty alleviation. In the following section, we will describe a case in which a problem-based learning strategy using the PPS as framework was applied in a real class setting to teach business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Both the teacher and the learners evaluated the teaching and learning experience of the course. Based on the learnings of our case study, we conclude with the development of a course to teach business strategies to alleviate poverty using the PPS framework. The paper concludes with a discussion on decisive factors for learning success.

2. Teaching sustainability by problem-based learning and experiential learning

Our review on current teaching approaches for sustainability issues reveal a clear tendency to apply problem-centred or problem-based learning (PBL) strategies, as well as experiential learning, i.e., what Brundiars et al. (2010) call “real-world learning opportunities”. Table 1 provides an overview of approaches to teaching sustainability found in the literature. Our review was guided by the following questions: 1) which are preferred strategies to teach sustainability at business schools?; 2) are collaborative competencies stressed in these strategies?; 3) what do researchers propose as success factors for developing and applying teaching concepts in sustainability?

A substantial amount of researchers in this field discuss particular pedagogical approaches to support the implementation of sustainability topics into business education. Audebrand (2010) examines the exploratory and generative impacts of metaphors on students’ understanding of the complex and paradoxical character of sustainable strategic management. Moreover, according to Shrivastava (2010), business students need to develop passion for sustainability. In line with this, the author argues for a holistic pedagogy that “integrates physical and emotional or spiritual learning with traditional cognitive (intellectual) learning about sustainability” (Shrivastava, 2010, p. 443). A course on managing sustainability with passion needs to include an appropriate analytical content, so that students can identify concrete sustainability issues in their lives and their social relationships. Additionally, the course needs to challenge them physically (e.g., through outdoor hikes) and emotionally (e.g., through experiencing emotions in settings that are novel to themselves).

¹ According to the Canadian Stakeholder Research Associates, stakeholder engagement is defined as the “... efforts to understand and involve stakeholders and their concerns into (an organization’s) activities and decision making processes” (Stakeholder Research Associates, 2005, p. 6).

² International Association for Public Participation. P2 Practitioner Tools. Retrieved from www.iap2.org.

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