

Teaching Tips/Notes



Changing Lives in a Semester: A Teaching Approach to Help with Tenure and Promotion While Providing an Experience They'll Never Forget

Do all university courses have to be structured in a traditional way? For many, the answer is a resounding, NO! Generally, we assume a course needs to have a midterm, final and at least one major project. Although this may fit well with many standard courses, it can be a wonderful experience to deviate away from the norm and delve into the world of service learning.

As an extension specialist in sustainable communities, I was asked to teach sustainable living at our university last semester. This was a course with a previous lecture format of planned presentations, five quizzes, a major research project and various smaller assignments. This was a solid foundational structure, but why not tear it apart and try to implement lasting pro environmental change on campus within a semester? That became my goal as I restructured the class. (See syllabus examples in Figures 1 and 2.) To summarize, the new course with 32 enrolled appeared as follows:

1. Students selected an area on campus to conduct a sustainability audit and submitted letters to the deans/facilities staff/administrative staff regarding their observations and specific recommendations for improvement.
2. Students selected environmental topics of top interest to them, merged themselves into groups, and worked all semester to try to see their pro environmental change come to fruition on campus. This was done using Community-Based Social Marketing Techniques and working closely with key campus stakeholders. Topics ranged from using a reusable bottle or mug to buying local food.
3. The major assignment for the semester evolved from class discussion, and became the first annual campus Earth Week with a focus on land, air, water, food, and a finale covering all topics at a student-organized sustainability fair.
4. A midterm was administered for content retention, but instead of a final exam, students submitted a fact sheet based on the environmental topic they had studied all semester. In co-authoring the fact sheets, this assists directly with tenure and promotion given the outreach expectations of extension faculty.

Unexpected Outcomes

1. Prompted by the student letters, dining services formed a sustainability group and have already begun working on better recycling habits, composting, and offering reusable "to-stay" cups in campus cafes.
2. Over 5,000 students participated in Earth Week, with over 1,000 signing various pro-environmental pledges.
3. In conducting a student life skill assessment in the class, significant changes occurred on all levels ($p = 0.001$ or smaller) at a 95% confidence level. This included not only expected skills gained in communication and marketing techniques which were a large focus of the class, but also in applying sustainability strategies in the workplace, general public speaking skills in other classes, working in groups, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, and overall self-confidence.
4. Students evaluated the course on all goals and items "higher" than all classes across campus, and rated it as "much higher" in learning to apply course material to improve thinking, problem solving and decisions.
5. Student evaluation comments following the semester demonstrated the course impact, as is demonstrated in the following selected quotes: "This course was the most useful course I have ever taken in my four years as an undergrad and one year as a grad student...I walked away from [the course] feeling as though I had made a difference in my own life, on campus, and in my career." "I love!!!! That this was a hands-on learning class. I really learned more than just the subject. It was indescribable how this class changed me and my future."

Tips for success

1. Collaborate with multiple stakeholders who can make change happen on campus. This fosters a sense of responsibility in students, but also ensures they will see results from their hard work.
2. Consider your tenure and promotion expectations. Can you find a good balance between students building their resumes and you checking off required tasks?
3. Demonstrate to students how to add publications and event planning from the class into their resumes. This helps them see the “so what” of their efforts.
4. Be flexible. Students – not the professor – designed the major assignment of Earth Week.
5. And lastly, but of most importance, show your enthusiasm for the subject matter and faith in their ability to succeed.

Remember, life change can happen in a semester!

Submitted by:

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Sustainable Living

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Spring 2012

FAV 264



Major Events

- February 1 Sustainability initiative group proposal to sustainability panel
- March 26 Final complete Project Handbook due
- April 13 Student Sustainability Fair: Plan event as a class, design and present group exhibit
- April 25 Publication due: Submitted to USU Extension or Peer-Reviewed Journal



Why Sustainable Living?

Sustainability is the conscious effort to behave in a manner that leaves this planet in a healthier state for future generations. This involves a three-legged intertwined commitment to improving environmental, economic, and social conditions. This course is designed to provide students with the theoretical and applicable tools to become effective sustainable change agents. Students will 1) experience first-hand the barriers and benefits of engaging in an individual proenvironmental change, 2) identify key theories explaining and predicting why people act sustainably, 3) work in groups with multiple stakeholders to implement a sustainability initiative on campus, 4) design a survey instrument with sustainability theory as a foundation to measure and analyze human behavior, 5) present their sustainability projects at the 1st Annual Student Sustainability Fair, and 6) publish their sustainability efforts in an Extension fact sheet (undergraduate) or academic journal (graduate). This is your chance not only be the change you wish to see, but to foster it!

Class Information

Class Meeting Time: MWF 11:30-12:20

Office Hours: MWF 12:30-1:30

Figures 1 and 2. Pages from Sustainable Living syllabus



“Be the change you want to see in the world”

Mahatma Gandhi

Grading System:

Percentage	Grade	Percentage	Grade
94-100%	A	74-<77%	C
90-<94%	A-	70-<74%	C-
87-<90%	B+	67-<70%	D+
84-<87%	B	64-<67%	D
80-<84%	B-	61-<64%	D-
77-<80%	C+	0-<61%	F

Grades:

Midterm Exam: 15%

Participation: 40%

- In class discussions and contribution
- Weekly assignments
- Group Member Assessments

Project Handbook: 15%

Earth Week Events & Exhibit: 20%

Publication: 10%

By taking this course, you will be able to...

1. Describe top sustainability and conservation theories
2. Apply theory to measure and influence proenvironmental behavior change
3. Use social marketing techniques to foster sustainability
4. Design survey instruments to measure behavior and evaluate programmatic success
5. Communicate sustainability via educational exhibits, and academic and creative writing
6. Collaborate with multiple stakeholders on *real-world* sustainability initiatives



Figures 1 and 2. Pages from Sustainable Living syllabus