

Learning a Second Language Through and with the Earth Charter

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Abstract

The process of learning itself is a process of understanding; understanding the world around us, understanding the way each one of us learns and understands the world, and comprehending that all understanding is related to language.

The phenomenon of Sustainable Development (SD) is comprehensive and complex and language is thus essential to achieve an understanding of it. Therefore, teaching a second language on this principle means giving the students a purpose to learn the language, not just that of the language itself, but that of being able to comprehend the world differently by learning it.

Understanding that education should be seen from a life perspective which takes in account students' experiences and their perceivable knowledge, we have adopted an approach that considers and follows the principles and values of The Earth Charter to teach English.

Education is here understood as a key to transformation and human evolution, not an end, but mainly, a way to promote sustainable way of living. Transformative education is vital. People are calling for an education that helps bring about the fundamental changes demanded by the world now. It urges that we, educators, in a movement for life and sustainability promote the necessary changes to achieve a better life for all.

The results as well as the learning shared by students and teacher are here described as a matter of reflection, motivating teachers to engage in this approach, this way of implementing a sustainable learning.

It is our responsibility and commitment as educators to promote the core values that represent human dignity, are life affirming, and are consistent with those of major cultures around the world.

Introduction

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The Earth Charter is used as an instrument for teachers' pre-service and in service. Since 1998, I have shared my use of The Charter with colleagues all over Brazil, in seminars, and in workshops. How does one use The Earth Charter as an educational instrument to teach English? The implementation occurs when I introduce a principle to the class. This leads to a discussion, inviting students to focus on the issue and reflect on it. After getting the students involved, the grammatical points set for the lesson are explored and studied, used in a natural way, as an opportunity for the students to get deeper into their own thoughts and points of view about the issue and our responsibility to make decisions that could change the way we live now. Thus, The Earth Charter underpins the evolution of the course, and supports the relationship between students and teachers.

I can evaluate the impact of the discussions and reflections with the students by the compositions they have written, and the opinions they have stated during our classes and seminars, most of which are recorded.

Some international documents, such as the Talloires Declaration issued by University Presidents and Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by UNDP, and the Earth Charter Initiative, recognize and assume the central role of education in promoting a more just, peaceful and sustainable future. Nevertheless, educational activities associated with values often constitute a contested field. This responsibility and commitment implies an awareness of the need to respect the rights of individual learners to independently hold values, and understand that within the search for common ground there remain important values associated with cultural diversity, as stated in the Earth Charter Education Advisory Committee On-line Discussion Forum—Synthesis.

Considering these aspects of the learning process we have been using the Earth Charter to achieve its three key educational objectives, which are, consciousness-raising, application of values and principles to local and global problems, and a call for action and partnership amongst all sectors and actors. We firmly believe we have been achieving these goals. During classes, the focus is on discussing and reflecting about the vital role of water in our lives, water management, about energy and natural resources, community health, actions and initiatives combining agriculture and biodiversity, and hunger and poverty—issues related to global crises that affect all.

Considering transdisciplinary educational perspectives as a basis for learning, we observe and respect all the information and experience learners bring and offer to the group, developing in this way an environment in which learners can share their knowledge and practice global ethics. The first four main principles of the Earth Charter provide a strong foundation for an ethic of responsibility, essential for creating and promoting a culture of peace, establishing a cooperative learning atmosphere, and triggering changes for the better in attitudes.

After working on these principles for years, collecting data for my research, and sharing the results of this approach with teachers all over my country, I learned more than I could have ever imagined. The opportunity to work in this field and in this manner has taught me a different path to a sustainable living, to a sustainable education, an education for all.

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