Sustainability Education: Leading by Example

In 1986, as I was completing my Master’s thesis at McGill University, I took a break to camp at Point Pelee during the spring bird migration. My good friend and fellow bird fanatic, Tracey, flew out from the west coast to join me. After all the good times – impressing the other campers with our culinary skills on a Coleman stove, meeting friends at the campfire, returning to soggy Shreddies having seen the rare Worm-eating Warbler – it was time to pack up. I remember taking some aluminum beverage containers to the closest garbage can. “Hey Alice,” Tracey called out, “can you return those for a refund or recycle them somewhere?” I realized I didn’t know, but I always listen to my wise friend, and we bundled the cans into my Landrover and headed back to Montreal. I investigated where and how I could recycle, and from that day, wherever in the world I have found myself, have sought out recycling facilities, asked questions, and done my best to reduce my impact. It all started with a simple non-judgmental question that got me thinking and changed my actions.

During my time working at the University of British Columbia, I found opportunities to set examples and initiate programs that I hope have made a difference. I shall describe three of them here.

The Sustainability Coordinators (SC) Program ([http://www.sustain.ubc.ca/sustainability-coordinators](http://www.sustain.ubc.ca/sustainability-coordinators)), started in 1999 by recruiting about 150 volunteers, me included. It provided tools and resources to promote and foster awareness about sustainability within our departments. I initiated such simple actions as re-using paper for printing, bringing second-hand dishes and cutlery to our kitchen, and providing energy-savings tips such as turning chargers and power bars off when not in use.

Fellow staffers took part and became actively involved. We provide bins for food scraps, paper napkins and other compostable material for the in-vessel composter on campus, the resulting output used for gardens around the University ([http://www.recycle.ubc.ca/compost.htm](http://www.recycle.ubc.ca/compost.htm)). We collect batteries for recycling ([http://www.sustain.ubc.ca/campus-sustainability/recycling-non-rechargeable-batteries](http://www.sustain.ubc.ca/campus-sustainability/recycling-non-rechargeable-batteries)) and plastic bags for re-use or recycling off campus. We developed protocols for e-commuting.

Since my department was a teaching support centre (then called the Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth, TAG), every week colleagues from all across the University came for workshops and meetings, thousands of people each year. They took notice. They took ideas and actions back to their departments.

For 14 years, I taught a third-year course, Human Ecology, involving my students in activities and assignments that would help them see connections between themselves and
world around them - see examples at https://cassidyinview.wordpress.com/my-publications/specific-to-biology-345-human-ecology/

The course was built around basic ecological principles and techniques, such as ecosystems, biodiversity, nutrient cycles, field observation and inquiry-based learning, blended with the study of current events and issues, both local and global. Much of the course content came out of what students were interested in, considered how ecology ties in to their daily life, and made connections between ecology and other disciplines they were studying.

Students found ways to make a difference, through their individual actions and also in groups through community service-learning projects. One course with about 350 alumni. Keeping in touch with many of them, living all over the world, it is encouraging to see them contributing to a more sustainable planet.

An invitation to attend a workshop in 2007 led to the design of a unique sustainability education program at UBC that has had many offshoots in the past two years. Freda Pagani, then director of UBC’s Sustainability Office invited me, as Associate Director of TAG, to take part in the Sustainability Across the Curriculum Leadership Workshop at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia (see http://www.aashe.org/.)

The only Canadian institution at the workshop, we were represented by myself as well as Kristin Orians, Associate Professor, Chemistry/Chemical Oceanography and Associate Director, Environmental Sciences, and Yona Sipos, Graduate Academic Assistant, TAG and Ph.D. Candidate, Faculty of Land and Food Systems. We learned about the Ponderosa and Piedmont Projects that have helped over 200 faculty members in the United States adapt their courses to include a sustainability focus.

Once home, we set about to design our own program, the Sustainability Education Intensive (SEI https://cassidyinview.wordpress.com/teaching-and-learning-workshops/sustainability-education-intensive-a-workshop-for-post-secondary-teachers/). With UBC’s reputation as a sustainability leader in North America, we were in a unique position to develop leadership both within and beyond our own institution.

Wanting to make our program unique to UBC, noted for its undergraduate student leaders, Yona and I involved undergraduate Sarah Nyrose in initial design and delivery, followed by Angela Willock, an alumnus from the first year. We sought help from colleagues in a variety of roles and from units across the University. We are grateful for financial support through the Sustainability Office, the Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth (which have each since merged or become part of other units; see http://www.sustain.ubc.ca/ and http://ctlt.ubc.ca/) and UBC students through the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF; http://tlef.ubc.ca/)

The 2.5-day Intensive provides tools, resources and time for participants – undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff and post-docs are all invited to apply – to develop a plan to integrate or enhance sustainability in their course, program or initiative. Studio
sessions and financial support for UBC colleagues over six months culminate in a showcase event to share the results.

Related programs have been developed at other post-secondary institutions, such as BCIT. A video highlights the programs at UBC and BCIT (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1y9nhul.TU). It was created and produced by Sean Devlin, then Communications Coordinator for goBeyond, a multi-campus climate change network with a strong student component.

The first two years of our program have enjoyed participation of colleagues from many disciplines at UBC as well as from four other post-secondary institutions, including two in Ontario. As a result, sustainability has been introduced or enhanced in about 40 courses, programs and initiatives.

Two alumni of the first SEI, Angela Willock and Maggie Baynham, further developed their SEI project as the BC-wide Sustainability Education across the Province (SEAP) that ran in 2010 and 2011.

Having an idea or asking a question, taking action, being visible about it, setting examples for others. It can start small; it can start with one idea or one person. The above examples show how quickly it can catch on and lead to other ideas and developments. Thanks for asking about those cans I was going to throw out in 1986, Tracey!

Further reading


About the author: Alice Cassidy, Principal of In View Education and Professional Development, is a biologist, science educator and educational developer. She has degrees from the University of Victoria, McGill University and the University of British Columbia. In the past 15 years, she taught in the Zoology Department and held leadership
roles at UBC’s Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth and associated Institute for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.