

# **Designing a Sustainable Marketing Class to Be Relevant: Fostering Engagement and Active Learning**

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*This paper discusses the activities and assignments of a sustainable marketing course that have been designed to show the personal as well as societal relevance of the course content to students. A description of several assignments is presented, both introductory and on-going. Additional insights provided by student responses indicate these activities garner student interest and “buy-in” of course content, as well as resulting personal and professional impact for students.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Sustainability has taken a permanent place on the corporate agenda, and plays an important role in the development of a competitive advantage for many companies. The United Nations has taken a global leadership role in this area for decades. This group declared 2005-2014 as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2014). Furthermore, an international conference on “Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Higher Education beyond 2014” called upon world leaders and those in higher education to support the transformative role higher education could make in sustainable development (“The Nagoya Declaration on Higher Education for Sustainable Development,” 2014). A sustainable marketing course is only one action toward this transformation, but can serve as a foundational step for students. Sharma and Kelly (2014) determined that building awareness of sustainability and developing aptitudes to understand limitation of general business practices were deemed crucial by students, and that students believed it is very important to be knowledgeable in this area. The authors conclude that higher education should play a role in providing students with the knowledge on this subject in order to encourage responsible citizens.

Sustainability has become an important topic for business and industry during this decade. Likewise, sustainability has taken a place in the curriculum during this time. Many marketing textbooks now integrate the topic of sustainability into chapter topics, but stand-alone sustainable marketing courses are also becoming a part of the marketing curriculum. In fact, sustainability has taken its place in both industry and higher education, resulting in certificates and specializations in sustainability at some universities. However, sustainable marketing has not yet reached critical mass across the curriculum, nor across US society. This paper will present the evolution and development of a sustainable marketing elective course at a regional university in the southeast US. Ten years ago, sustainability was not prevalent in the curriculum and in fact, textbooks were very limited. This course was developed by the author more than a decade ago, as a marketing elective for marketing majors and minors. It was offered in

alternate years, via both online and on-ground formats. During the past six years, the course has been offered every spring semester, twice via on-ground and four times in online format. The continued regular offering of the course has allowed this instructor to continue to build both course content and course activities/assignments.

The introductory class discussion covered typical sustainable topics such as recycling, energy conservation, alternative energy formats, as well as environmental regulations. Student responses were eye-opening in the early classes. The students had little knowledge about sustainability, beyond recycling and alternative energy automobiles. The common sentiment during class discussion focused in two areas: 1) individually, "I don't have much impact on the environment, so my little changes will not solve the world's problems," and 2) "there is nothing here (locally) that I can do that will support the environment and sustainability." Regionally, and state-wide, environmental conservation was pretty low on the list of priorities for business and industry, as well as society at the time. It now became clear that the course content, topics and discussion needed to be more personally relevant to students, while engaging them with course content via learning activities and assignments. As the course was offered regularly each spring, students from management, general business and entrepreneurship registered more frequently. This was probably a result of the more frequent online offering, and that these programs offer online complete degrees. As such, the makeup and course preparation of enrolled students also evolved. This following discussion will present the course activities and assignments, that have become regular components of the course.

Development of activities and assignments that would engage students, provide them an opportunity to see their individual impact on the environment, and that were impactful and memorable became the driving force in class activities. Engagement research (Lawson & Lawson, 2013) has generalized that students who are successfully engaged at the beginning of a course or semester, are more likely to remain engaged. Active learning research also supports pedagogical approaches that involve students in things that make them think about what they are doing (Auster & Wylie, 2006), and increases their motivation, critical thinking skills, and transfer of new information (Gregory, 2013). Research by Taylor, Hunter, Melton and Goodwin (2011) provided several strategies for student engagement that support similar active learning approaches. Taylor et al. suggest making a linkage between the class material and activities with students' future professional roles. They also encourage the inclusion of writing and discussion assignments that require inclusion of current business events and news articles chosen by the student for their relationship to assigned chapter/topic readings.

## **INTRODUCTORY ASSIGNMENTS**

Integrating assignments and learning activities that will encourage students to become involved with the course content, both personally and from a professional viewpoint has been one major objective in this sustainable marketing course. The first two weeks of the term, students are "shopping" for courses, so the roster will change almost daily. As a result, course content coverage and activities have been planned in a way that allows some "catch-up" time while still exposing students to relevant content. The activities during these first two weeks are designed to familiarize student with sustainable topics, and expose them to their own consumption habits and patterns. Students will often refer to one or more of these assignments throughout the semester during weekly reading and discussion.

### **Story of Stuff ("The Story of Stuff," 2018)**

This site is updated regularly and includes: blog posts, movies, additional learning resources and activities, as well as actions for both individuals and groups. The original 2007 Story of Stuff movie is origination of this site that continues to expand materials and content. The students are asked to view a minimum of three different movies posted on the site, as well as explore the other information present. They are asked to write a single-page, double-spaced "reflection" paper. Specifically, they are to discuss the three movies they viewed, and what they learned, which is usually a lot! The submissions are quite revealing, as most students knew little-to nothing about what they viewed. They also post a discussion

summary of what they watched and what new information they learned to a discussion board, which requires that they respond to at least one other post for the online offering. Usually they reply to more than one student, and the online discussion becomes very engaged with the perspectives of classmates. The on-ground class discussion takes one class session, and again students become engaged with their own learning experience, as well as the information shared by classmates. Often students view different movies, as they select the three from more than a dozen on the site. As a result, discussion actually involves explanation of multiple topics for those who did not view the specific movie, and then discussion on relevance to everyone in the course. Credit and grading is for coverage and discussion; they are given credit for identification and discussion of the three movies viewed, additional site coverage and content, and if they specifically address what they learned during the activity.

### **Consumption/Disposal Journal**

This assignment continues into the third week of the semester, as students are asked to “journal” or track their daily activities, keeping details on what they consume (meals, shower, travel, etc.) and how they dispose of “trash” throughout the day. So, if they eat fast food—where does the paper, plastic, etc. go when they are finished. Do they use “regular” dishes and flatware at home, then hand wash or use the dishwasher. How far do they travel to/from work and school? They are asked to track this for four days—two week days and over a weekend. This allows students to cover regular class/work days, as well as weekend work or special activities. The instructor provides a simplified example of a work day including: the two-cups of coffee for breakfast, with K-cups in the trash; coffee cups in the dishwasher; the 35 mile drive to work, alone, no car-pooling, and then back home in the evening. Students are asked to consider if they drink bottled water, or carry a refillable water bottle, as well as what they do with plastic bottles, cups, paper on campus or at work. Grading is relevant to consistent coverage and discussion of what they do with the waste. They are not graded on the critical level of specific details, although many are quite thorough in documenting their activities and disposal patterns. Students will conduct this same exercise/activity again at the end (last two weeks) of the semester. At the conclusion of this second journal entry, they are asked to discuss if their habits and actions have changed since beginning the course. Sometimes they do, and quite significantly.

### **Carbon Footprint Calculator**

Three or more online carbon footprint calculators are provided in the learning management system of the course. Throughout the years, these will change, as one site is closed, and others are posted. Currently there are three resource links provided to students: 1) “Carbon Calculator,” (2019, Nature Conservancy), 2) “Footprint Calculator,” (2003-2019, Global Footprint Network), and 3) “Carbon Footprint Calculator,” (2016, EPA). Students are to use two different calculators, and determine their individual carbon footprint. They then compare the results of the two for similarities and differences. They are asked to decide if one is more accurate for their individual lifestyle than the other. They write up the results from the two sites, and identify any noteworthy facts. They are often surprised to find out “how many earths” it would take to support society as a whole, if everyone consumed as they do. Other results might indicate how long the earth would be habitable, again if all of civilization lived the way they do. After submitting the assignment, online students post a brief summary of their results and interesting findings, and on-ground students devote a class discussion session to the specifics of their findings, and compare their results and how they might change their individual actions.

### **ON-GOING SEMESTER ASSIGNMENTS**

Students have two assignments that continue throughout the semester. These are designed to get students thinking about the course content from a more “global” or “encompassing” perspective. Each involves a weekly “blog” post on the course LMS, with prompts related to the specific reading topic(s) covered in the text for the week. The blogs in the LMS are graded privately each week, but the posts are available for all members of the class to see and review.

## **Corporate Review**

The first assignment is a corporate review, which culminates in an end-of-semester summary paper, and comparative team paper and presentation. Students are assigned a company or corporation that they will research and review throughout the semester. (In some instances students have worked for a company that they wished to review, such as Caterpillar.) Weekly prompts are provided for them to post information in the Corporate Blog, relating to how the company addresses one or more marketing actions and strategies relevant to the week's reading. At the end of the term, they take these weekly blog posts and compose a Corporate Summary Review Paper. The students are then assigned to a team of three to four students that compare their individual companies, identifying both strengths and weaknesses in their sustainability actions and strategies. In addition they are asked to identify corporate transformations that have occurred as a result of sustainability. Finally, the student teams are to compare across all companies, and identify successful sustainable marketing efforts common across their corporations. Students teams then present their findings to the class, and the class discusses these presentations, either during the final examination time period for the on-ground class, or via a discussion board for the online course.

## **News & Views Blog**

The second assignment is a News & Views Blog that prompts students to identify something they "see" during the past week related to the week's discussion and topic(s). Some of the prompts are more directed to specific company information or perhaps news items related to a topic in the weekly reading. Others are a very simple prompt to recognize "something related to class" that you encountered during the week. As with other assignments, this one is "graded" based upon completion as well as citing any online source for the information.

## **EXAMPLES OF STUDENT DISCUSSION SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT**

The following selective examples provide insights in the students' participation and engagement with weekly News & Views Blog posts from the last two semesters offered online. The students may conduct some online research, and find an article that they discuss and provide a citation/reference. Others encounter something in their daily activities and realize the relevance of this to class discussion.

VS: "I recently read an article about how Starbucks is going green. They are making cups that are more recyclable, stores are being built to be more eco-friendly, and conserving water and energy use. I think this is great, Starbucks is such a large company they surely make an impact on the environment."

MM: "...I came across an article about the carbon footprints of sandwiches. I really had no idea that a big part of carbon emissions in our atmosphere on a daily basis come from the things we eat almost daily..."

VD: "My husband and I are remodeling our home and we are putting in new flooring. I noticed on the box it says the flooring is made out of 100 percent recyclable materials and I never would have thought about that before until taking this class."

VD: "I saw a really neat video on Facebook of a gym called Eco Gym that uses equipment which creates energy from the workouts of its members as a method to cut down on energy costs. The savings are then passed back to the gym members to give them an incentive to keep working out."

HS: "This week I tried to pay attention to the things I bought and use to see if I could find anything on the packages about sustainability. I was surprised to find a few items that did..."

HS: “For this weeks (SIC) news and views I would like to discuss something I encountered in my local mall. It is called EcoATM. I have seen these before, but never quite knew what it was. It is an ATM where you can trade in your old cell phone for cash...”

ES: “This week for my news and views blog I have been talking to my family about this class and helping them understand more about the same topics we have been discussing on sustainability. This week, my older sister went to the grocery store and sent me a photo about the product, Seventh Generation Laundry Detergent that has a unique, compostable or recyclable outer shell made of re-purposed fiber. I thought it was nice to see and made me happy that she was paying attention to sustainable products since I have been telling them about sustainability. I hope that this will help her become more aware of how and what she purchases!”

CS: “There is a brewery in Florida that recently created six-pack rings that go around the beer that is environmentally friendly. The small brewery was tired of seeing all the plastic rings wash up on shore and the damage done to sea life. Saltwater Brewery took action and created the rings that are made of wheat and barley that either biodegrade or serve as a snack for the marine life. It is very expensive for the small brewery, so they are trying to get other companies to invest and use for their beers. I really hope this becomes a requirement for ALL beverages that have plastic rings.”

SB: “I found the coolest article this week. The first gin made from discarded grapes is going to be in Tesco's stores soon...”

SB: “I actually am in Utah for spring break for a collegiate horse show. To get here we had to fly, unless we wanted to drive 25 hours. We rented a Jeep Cherokee and it is actually the eco boost and we couldn't believe what it does. Any time we stop for more than just like 5 seconds the car quits running and once you hit the brakes it starts right back up and goes...”

These brief examples are indicative of student engagement with the course content, and active learning. Students are conducting additional research that while not extensive, such as a research paper, demonstrates the relevance of class discussion and content to current everyday life. Furthermore, the students are engaging with course content and identifying how sustainability is relevant to them personally.

There is a culminating assignment at the conclusion of the semester, identified as the “Aha Moment.” Students are asked to identify one topic, activity or assignment that was particularly relevant to them, describe it and discuss why it was an “Aha Moment” during the semester. The selective responses below indicate a variety of the course assignments “hit home” with them as they progress through the course. These posts are from the spring 2018 online course.

CC: “A topic and assignment that stands out to me the most, is the activity where I learned just how non"green" I was. My carbon foot-print was absolutely awful! I'm not as sustainable as I want to be, but I do think I'm more sustainable than I was when I started this class in January.”

ML: “When I first came into this course I didn't realize just how many companies are going green nor did I realize how big of a problem sustainability was in our business world. I enjoyed doing the News & Views Blog every week, being able to research the

recent developments in the sustainable/green community. Now at the end of this course I hope that wherever I end up and at whatever company I work for, I hope I am able to raise awareness about their sustainable efforts.”

CB: “It’s changed a whole heck of a lot. Sustainable marketing to me seemed like something we could do without, or shouldn’t bare too much mind too, however this class really helped to change that perspective. I believe each and every company, has an obligation to continuously try to better themselves in terms of how they produce items, gather the materials, and the by-products in which they create affects our world.”

AA: “My "aha" moment from this course is easy to pinpoint - the negative effects of bottling water. I realize that I have beaten this subject nearly to death throughout the semester, but it is only because I was so taken aback. The thought of me destroying ecosystems simply by drinking bottled water is so disturbing to me. Obviously I was aware that plastic bottles are a poor choice of container, but I had never thought that harvesting the water could be so damaging to the environment. Since then, I have drastically cut back my consumption of bottled water, and I have made efforts to educate my friends of its harmful effects. Also, this helped me to realize that the smallest, simplest actions can have dire effects that we may not even realize.”

CH: “This course was collectively an "aha moment" for me really. I learned something new or built on my previous understanding every week. I have definitely become a lot more aware of the impact everything I do has on the environment. I also look for and notice businesses making efforts to go green. I really have started looking into different corporations that I use regularly to see what if they do their part, not only for sustainability but all aspects of social responsibility.”

KK: “My aha moment was when we calculated our energy consumption numbers. Based on the amount of energy that I alone consume, if everyone consumed the same amount, we would need five Earths (SIC) worth of energy to survive. That was a very humbling realization that I use a lot of energy. Which gave me the motivation to learn as much as I could from this class and reduce the amount of energy I use.”

About a month after the close of the spring 2018 semester, a student sent the following email, and gave consent to share his comments:

“Professor Kunz,

I want to take a moment to let you know what a profound impact our Sustainable Marketing class had on me. Since finishing the semester, my wife and I have picked up recycling services through Republic. It is hard to believe how much recyclable material we discard within a week until I actually see the full container every Monday evening. Also, I have been encouraging my employer to start recycling cardboard, though that crusade has been a bit more difficult. Regardless, I appreciate the knowledge and how much you genuinely seem to care about the issue of sustainability. I hope to use this experience to encourage someone else to continue the fight.

Thank you,

Austin”

This email, that came long after the semester closed, is a clear indication that should a student desire to engage with the course content and become an active learner, the information gained can and does impact students, both in the classroom and beyond.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Literature addressing student engagement and active learning indicates students who are engaged with the course early in the semester or term, are very likely to remain engaged throughout the class (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Additionally, the cultural relevance, that which connects with emotions and cognitions, will be more likely when an activity has personal relevance or significance. The previous examples provide evidence that students found relevance in the course content throughout the semester. As Bonwell and Eison (1991) defined active learning as getting students thinking about what they were doing, and how those things related to the course, this discussion would indicate students in this sustainable class are engaged and experienced active learning. Furthermore, the evidence suggests students had the opportunity to choose their level of engagement with the course content and activities (Taylor et al., 2011), and gain a sense of accomplishment when they believe they are responsible for their own learning. Sharma and Kelly (2014) posit the importance of higher education taking responsibility to ensure graduates acquire relevant and practical sustainable development skills. The students' contribution to this sustainable marketing course discussion would indicate at a minimum an increased awareness of sustainability, and the presence of a sense of responsibility to the environment, as both citizens and future professionals. The future offering of this course will be on-ground, and again this assignment will be implemented, with plans to take part of or a full day of class discussion to talk about the individual items students have found for the News Item blog assignment.

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