

# Chapter 15

## Teaching Sustainability as a Social Issue: Learning from Dialogue in a High School Social Studies Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

*Many researchers cite living more sustainably as humans' most pressing long-range challenge. Engaging students with the social issues associated with living more sustainably may help to create dialogue about such needs. Unfortunately, despite calls by education researchers for the development of this kind of instruction -- and the apparent need for renewed public discussion on matters like climate change -- very little is known about how teachers deliver instruction on the social issues of sustainability (SIS). Through the research question, "How do teachers implement and assess SIS in a classroom setting?" this chapter reveals findings suggesting that teachers successfully used an SIS approach to spur dialogue among students. These findings show the benefits and ongoing pedagogical challenges of using dialogue as a means to learn about SIS.*

### INTRODUCTION

Humanity's most pressing long-term challenge may be for individuals to learn how to limit their unsustainable consumption habits (Witthaus, McCandless, & Lambert, 2010). Such unus-

tainable habits -- like relying on fossil fuels as a primary energy source for transportation-- have likely influenced the Earth's atmospheric carbon content passing 400 parts per million for the first time in humans' three million year existence. Other similarly serious news about environmental degradation merit discussion, but the point of our chapter is to reflect upon the role of education in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5856-1.ch015

addressing, mitigating, and possibly reversing human's current trend of unsustainable behavior.

UNESCO (2004) argues that education has a key role in determining how people should live more sustainable lifestyles. In fact, within the education field, teaching about environmental issues has a long history (Steinberg, 2009). However, education researchers have recently noted that merely learning about such issues does not typically translate into the learner doing something with that knowledge (Nolet, 2009). So, then what kind of education has the potential to engage students with knowledge of sustainability issues *and* potentially create a stronger impetus to do something with that knowledge?

In this chapter, we argue that a relatively new approach to engaging students with sustainability issues may indeed have the potential to spur civic action-taking missing from more didactic approaches (Crocco, 2007). This approach, something we call the “social issues of sustainability” (SIS), guides student dialogue around questions promoting open-ended discussion. Such SIS questions could include, “Who is responsible for recycling?” or “Who should pay for damages caused by Hurricane Sandy?” Such questions aim to get participants to realize that multiple answers may exist, and thus, shed light on the complexity of the matter.

Consider how these questions' compositions encourage discussion that may start “democratic dialogues.” Crocco (2007) described democratic dialogues as “... structured discussions designed to tackle tough issues” (p. 2). The purpose of such dialogues, she writes, is for its participants:

*... to take positions in light of evidence and competing perspectives, and to listen respectfully to opposing viewpoints. Democratic dialogues ideally empower participants to determine their own futures by encouraging them to take action to address social, communal, and personal challenges. (Crocco, 2007, p. 2)*

Therefore, we could read a SIS framework as a version of democratic dialogue about environmental-related topics. It aims to spur discussion about potential solutions to some of the most pressing issues regarding humans and their impact on natural resources.

Thus, in our study involving two secondary social studies teachers, we gained a snapshot into how they taught and assessed curriculum centered around SIS questions via democratic dialogue. For example, we discovered that when the teachers linked SIS questions to issues of relevance to the students, dialogue was diverse and uncovered many layers of complexity associated with the topic. Additionally, we noticed that the teachers gave strong formative assessment grades when students in a whole-class discussion asked to know more about an issue before taking a stance. Most interestingly, we noticed that the teachers favored student responses to SIS questions that were realistic to implement, but they did not explicitly encourage such answers.

Overall, we recommended a few considerations if these or other teachers were to deliver this kind of SIS instruction again. We pose several ideas in this chapter, but we mention two of them here. First: We felt that the SIS questions they used (for example, “Would you drink reclaimed water?”) produced engaging discussion, but we thought starting one of the lessons with a question like, “Should we care about our water usage?” might be a better way to engage students in determining the significance of the problem (instead of starting lessons with inquiries like, “How can we limit our water usage?”). Second: we suggest that teachers' desire for students to self-critique be made a more integral part of the assessment process.

Overall, our objectives in this chapter revolve around four points. First, we seek to establish why an SIS teaching approach may have merit in spurring active citizenship skills. Second, we outline how two secondary social studies teachers created a curriculum that centered on SIS-oriented questioning and detail the strengths and challenges

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