

# HIGHER EDUCATION



## Experimenting with the Earth Charter: Activities of the Faculty of Educational Sciences

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### **Introduction**

The Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Granada has undertaken a series of experimental activities based on the Earth Charter with students from different educational programmes. These activities are in response to a commitment amongst most members of this faculty to gradually incorporate the Earth Charter principles within the entire university community.

The Faculty Board's decision to endorse the Earth Charter in 2006 was a testament to this commitment. The document was presented before the student population in a public ceremony, presided by the Dean, D. Francisco Fernández Palomares.



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Many of the activities developed by the faculty have been inspired by the principles contained in the Earth Charter. One of the main activities has been the creation of an interdepartmental Earth Charter research and development group. In this case study, however, only three experiences developed with graduate students in Child Education will be described in depth. We will also describe an activity in Sensorial Conscience, carried out in two subjects: Philosophy in Education and Education for Peace.

## Experiences in a Graduate Course of Child Education

The following are three experiences undertaken by two groups of students in their second year of the Graduate Course of Child Education. These took place during the 2006 and 2007 academic terms, and were promoted by Professor José Luis Conde. Participating students, between 18-21 years of age, were encouraged by Professor Conde to use art in various forms, such as corporal expression, plays, and magic, to express the Earth Charter principles. The aim was to sensitize other people, especially those participating in the educational activities described below.

### 1. Earth Charter Diary

The objective of this activity was to familiarize students about the notion of sustainability within the Earth Charter and its principles, and to outline the ways and advantages of implementing these. This experience involved a total of 200 students directly and, indirectly, their circle of relatives, friends and acquaintances were also included. The impact has been an increased awareness about the holistic framework offered by the Earth Charter, but, above all, the possibilities for its application.

### Methodological Aspects

The first activity was to provide students with a comprehensive overview of the sustainability notion and the Earth Charter principles. This was achieved through a PowerPoint presentation including photographs for

each principle that had been selected during a weekly seminar of the group "Teaching Together."

Once the students were briefed on the Earth Charter principles, they were asked to write a journal entry, over the course of one academic term, which defines each principle. The students were then asked to initiate activities in their daily lives that could be seen from the perspective of 'human dignity.' Each student would have to record these actions in their personal diary, and then match it to one or more principles that they had written about. Later, they could reflect on the reasons why these actions were matched to each principle and, most of all, what impact this had on the persons involved in the action, and on the students themselves.

After carrying out this project, we were able to ascertain that the students were positively affected by the Earth Charter principles. The students adopted habits that reflected the core values of the document, and most students continue to record their activities in the daily journal.

Another aspect we would like to mention is the fact that when a student carries out any action, not only is he/she affected, but others also automatically become familiar with the actions and subsequently become inspired – producing a domino effect that exponentially multiplies the number of people committed to achieving changes in conscience. This can be seen as bringing about a more sustainable future and a positive transformation of society.

**The following are excerpts from student diaries that portray the impact of the experience.**

*Next to my house there is a home for the elderly, which I used to visit every once in a while. The other day, I walked past the door thinking that I had to visit them soon, so today I made up my mind and called a friend, and we have visited the home. –*

*Eva María Burgos*

*There was a small two- or three-week-old kitten. It looked at me with that cute little face... it was a*

*feeling... almost indescribable. My partner and I looked at each other and decided to adopt her. –  
Mónica González*

*In my house, instead of throwing away the used up cooking oil into the kitchen sink or in the trash, we are collecting it in large containers to take them to my grandmother so that she may recycle it and make soap, which we believe also saves us money when buying detergents. –  
Marta Arellano*

*When I go shopping, I don't use plastic bags any more, but instead I carry my own shopping bag. –  
María Pérez*

### **Lessons learned**

After this experience, in addition to becoming familiar with the Earth Charter principles, the students were trained to play a leading role in bringing about change in their immediate surroundings. This is testament to the fact that through their actions, these students can be influential in the transformation of society. The positive effects generated by this experience serve as an inspiration to replicate this practice (writing a diary of the Earth Charter principles) to other faculties within university settings, and even to primary schools and high schools in Granada; and, if possible, throughout the Spanish territory.

## **2 . Webpage: Teaching Together**

The objective of this proposal is to make known and widely available the curricular materials needed for children's education in low-income, Spanish-speaking communities. The experience has involved over 400 students and will benefit thousands of people. As a direct result of the proposal, a webpage has been launched to offer a number of educational resources that may be used by a broad sector of the educational community.

Our contribution, as we have pointed out, has been to design a webpage on children's education entitled, "Teaching Together," which is linked to the Earth

Charter and to the Spanish-based Fundación Valores. The purpose is to share curricular materials with Spanish-speaking teachers and parents, anywhere in the world, that may need assistance teaching children in the classroom. What stands out about the webpage is that the educational materials collected and selected (by over 400 Educational Science students of the University of Granada) are presented in a fun and interactive manner.

### **Methodological Aspects**

As we mentioned before, the form in which this material is presented on the webpage is appealing and fun for the child, which is the only way for children to learn anything, and the only way in which we should always have been taught – through games, songs, stories, riddles, poetry, and even jokes. A wide range of material is available for teachers to use in whatever form is most convenient.

Besides all of these materials, we have launched a virtual library recommending fifteen 'must read' books for each of the six years of the Child Education phase. We also recommend educational films, teach how to make balloon figures and shadows, how to reach out to people with disabilities and – Ah! – since this is the year of magic, we also teach educators to venture inside the fascinating world of physics through magic.

We have also opened up an online forum for parents and teachers who might be seeking advice on a particular situation; people who have gone through similar situations may also help them to find a practical solution. By the same token, we also have a niche of short stories where grown-ups can go to reflect and express themselves, and a chest where anyone can send a treasure: a song, a poem, a story... that we can all share.

And finally, we have opened up a section called the "Ecological Niche," where we offer a series of recommendations that may be implemented in daily routines. These can be directly linked with Earth Charter principles 5, 6, 7 and 8, and related to the pillar "Ecological Integrity" in the Earth Charter.

### **Lessons learned**

This project teaches students about the virtue of collaborative work between faculty members, and about the possibility to be able to make knowledge available to all those who might need it. This is thanks to the modern-day technological means at hand.

### **3. Toy Fair**

The objective of this proposal was to set up a Toy Fair (featuring non-warlike, non-sexist toys), for children in several schools in the city of Granada. This experience has been carried out with over 200 students every year. Its mission is to promote a culture of non-violence and peace (Earth Charter principles 14, 15 and 16) among children and teachers.

### **Methodological Aspects**

The Toy Fair is designed to offer used toys - in good shape, that are non-warlike or sexist - to children. This exchange is made possible through the donations of toys and in-kind donations by students of the Faculty. All the toys left over from the fair are donated to needy schools and NGOs.

In addition, complementary recreational activities, such as workshops and games, were carried out by the students. These were aimed at the children of the invited schools, where teachers and parents are provided with a detailed description of the features that a good toy should have, as well as the educational toys most suitable to children of every age group.



Project - The Magic of Science.

The following are excerpts of testimonials from the Toy Fair registration book.

*Promising, congratulations; what has caught my attention is the fact that the children have felt more attracted to the workshops and the collaborative games, than to the exchange of toys itself.*

*It appears to be a wonderful idea, because many parents like myself were unaware of what sort of toys were most suitable for the development of our children; the idea of a toy exchange is also very good, and if we were to adopt this practice of exchange, we would also be finding promising alternatives to a consumer society.*

### **Lessons learned**

This project, like previous ones, teaches students about the virtues of collaborative work, not only among those students organizing and carrying out the event, but also among faculty peers submitting proposals to the different workshops. These kinds of activities help in the practical application of education for sustainable development by disseminating the principles of non-violence and peace in Pillar 4 of the Earth Charter (Democracy, Non-violence and Peace), to children in the early stages of childhood.

## **Experience in Sensorial Conscience, developed by Professor Alfonso Fernández Herrería**

This activity on sensorial conscience in nature was carried out during the first quarter of the 2006–2007 term (October–January) in the subject area of Philosophy in Education, as part of the Degree Course of Pedagogy. During the second quarter (mid-February – mid-June), this activity was conducted in the subject area of Peace Education, within the specialization of Teaching and Child Education. Both are subjects of the Faculty of Educational Science at the University of Granada.

We are aware that the learning process, as normally conceptualized within the formal realm, is mainly focused on cognitive aspects. Although essential, these do not exhaust, by any means, all learning possibilities. It is fundamental to involve the three basic dimensions of the individual: affective, cognitive and active.

The objective of this practice was to give students in both subjects an experience of discovery – of affective closeness with nature through their senses – and establish a more personal connection with nature through this contact. For the most part, adults detach themselves from this sensitive world and from the personal experiences it implies. However, children have a conscience that is less dominated by words, and are therefore more capable of connecting with their senses. For this reason, students need to have a direct experience of what sensorial conscience is all about, and to value for themselves its educational potential. This serves to prove how easy and rewarding this technique can be.

In order to attain these objectives of eliminating, insofar as possible, the discrepancies between information (which increases quickly in quantity and availability) and a personal and social commitment to a sustainable way of life, it is useful to briefly describe the methodological aspects of this activity.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Methodological aspects***

First, the students were provided with information about sensorial conscience. The practice of sensorial conscience involves attention and observation, not only from the senses, but also towards our own inner reality. Sensorial conscience does not require intellectual contemplation, concentration, or analysis, but, rather, it is about raising direct consciousness - not through ideas or concepts, but through the dynamic sensorial experience itself. For this reason, it is not about thinking about the world, about seeing it through words and through labels of any kind, but quite simply it is to see the world, feel it, listen to it, and touch it – to taste the unique flavour of the sensorial.

Sensorial conscience is about opening up the conscience to what it is, flowing with what is being

experienced, following it and allowing it to be what it is. It is not about rejecting what we dislike, nor selecting what we like, but rather adopting a sense of detached impartiality. Thus, our attention is conditioned in the least possible way by our thoughts, memories, experiences, affability, rejection, and prejudice, making our observation a more realistic experience.

This observation requires a recovery of the senses, although not in a disjointed form, but rather as a complete movement filled with sensitivity. So, it is not only about perceiving with your sight, hearing or touch, but with all the senses intertwined. When you look at the world with that immense sensitivity and with all the senses wide awake, there is an extraordinary sensation of energy, of beauty.

Sensitivity is a flourishing of the senses, which is a highly vulnerable condition. But we lose this vulnerability in the modern-day world of noise, brutality, triviality and superficiality in which we live. We have a natural tendency to become de-sensitized to the world around us. We don't really look; we just glance in a superficial and quick manner, without wasting too much energy. The result is boredom when all that we see is what we expect to see. This bogs down our sensorial conscience and it becomes extremely impoverished.

Watching without speaking, without judging, without assessing, the silence of the mind emerges naturally and with ease. Silence surfaces when there is profound attention, and the other way around, attention becomes more profound when there is silence. This proves that there are different degrees of conscience or sensorial attention.

After sharing these ideas, the students were asked to put them into practice in nature, and to prepare a written report that was later discussed in class. A total of 214 students completed the exercise, 43 of them from Philosophy in Education, and the remainder from Peace Education. The same teacher was in charge for both subject areas.

**The impact of the exercise is reflected in the testimonials below, selected from the reports**

<sup>55</sup> This experience was published in the magazine *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación*, edited by the OEI, in its edition n° 43/3 of 25-06-07 with the title: Incorporation of the emotional element in the initial training of teachers. An experience for the development of the sensorial conscience. Authors: Alfonso Fernández Herrería and M° del Carmen López López, professors at the University of Granada. The entire piece is on the Internet, in PDF format.

**written by the students:**

*When I opened my eyes I felt an inner peace which made me even feel sorry I hadn't experienced this before. Then, I observed everything around me in a different way. Its beauty was overwhelming.*

*The beauty was such that my roaming eyes did not know which way to look, ready to grasp every image and safeguard it like a treasure. The mountains rose majestically before me and I felt very small before such grandeur... How could we fail to see such perfection?... I really felt, and feel, privileged and grateful to the Universe for allowing me to enjoy its magnificence and perfect symphony. Thank you.*

*I could hear the swift rippling of the water, flowing... I decided to sit down for a while, facing it. There on the ground, I could feel the coolness and dampness of the soil penetrate my body... I remained there gazing at that stream... Time stood still and for a moment there, I felt like I was water.*

The above excerpts offer proof of the real and profound impact – the amazement – that can emerge from the perceptive recreation of natural surroundings and spaces, which are in many cases familiar. This can also emerge from putting the student face to face with a reality that does not display all of its richness merely through the intellectual and rationalistic perspective to which we have grown so accustomed via formal education.

**Lessons learned**

This activity allows students to experiment with other more insightful 'encounters:' sensorial-corporal, affective, emotional, and spiritual, that is, those areas that have almost been forgotten in traditional educational practice. And it is precisely within them that the key to success for any comprehensive learning resides. If we wish for an authentic education, we must be able to overcome partial learning strategies. Either we embrace previously forgotten dimensions of the individual, or we will continue to reproduce the current

sense of educational disenchantment. By being truly comprehensive, education will also be healthy, satisfactory, and self-fulfilling, and not unhealthy and discouraging, as it is today.

From this experience, we can also gauge its efficacy in going straight to the core of personal change: through values, profound attitudes, and experiences that motivate individuals to truly get involved without having to create distractions for the lack of motivation. Quite the opposite, these are experiences that students have felt the desire to replicate regardless of any evaluation.

Through this experience, it has been possible to restore the connection between human beings and their natural surroundings; to eliminate the sense of feeling detached, disoriented, and uncommitted towards the environment; and to experience an affectionate relationship of empathy, friendship, fraternity, and even 'blending' with nature. Individuals who undergo this process will never harm the environment, or any other human being, because this closeness involves values such as care, respect, recognition, and gratitude towards the natural world. This has been reflected in students' writings, and even more so, in classroom discussion – a whole constellation of ethical and aesthetic values, which constitute the core of a sustainable way of life, as stated in the Earth Charter. With this heightened sensorial consciousness, it is then more appropriate to think about intellectual learning, since it is easier to become familiar with what we love than with what was almost indifferent to us.

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