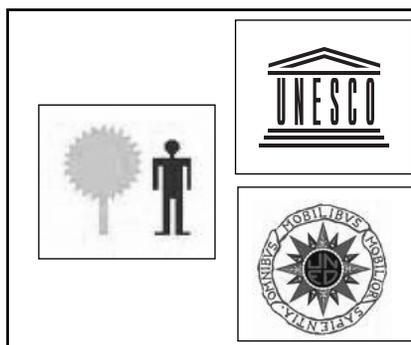


Faculty experiences using the Earth Charter in Distance Learning Programmes

Ángeles Murga and María Novo⁶³



Introduction

Since its launch in March 2000, and its endorsement by UNESCO in 2003, the Earth Charter has become one of the many calls by international organizations to governments and individuals to spearhead positive change in the societies in which we live. As such, the Charter might best be regarded as a code of ethics, one that offers a solid basis for building a sustainable future governed by respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace.

⁶³ UNESCO Chair of Environmental Education and Sustainable Development (National University of Distance Education, UNED, Spain)

The Earth Charter promotes values and principles that are a key part of the pedagogical framework required to design, and then implement, course content geared towards realizing the notion of sustainability. The document itself can be used as an effective, multi-faceted methodological tool in teaching-learning processes; as a basis for developing didactic materials; as a catalyst for dialogue about the interrelationship between social and ecological values; and, as a bank of key concepts related to nature, human and social harmony, and sustainable development.

Cognizant of all of these possibilities, in October 2002, the faculty members of the UNESCO Chair of Environmental Education and Sustainable Development at the National University of Distance Education (UNED, Spain) submitted a proposal to incorporate the Earth Charter into its educational provision. As a result, a course was created as part of the Continuing Education Programme (*Programa de Educación Permanente*). The course is primarily designed to meet the life-long learning needs of educators and professors. The objective is to assist teaching faculty in recognizing the relevance of the Earth Charter to the educational process, to encourage them to develop course content inspired by the Charter's principles, to implement them in schools and evaluate their impact.

However, the proposal also recognized the fact that course participants could carry out their practice in non-formal, and even informal, educational settings. This is simply due to the fact that the Earth Charter provides a theoretical framework to achieve **educational objectives in three main interrelated areas:**

- a) To increase public awareness of the social, economic and environmental problems threatening the integrity of our planet.
- b) To create a common understanding among the world's population of the necessity to develop more sustainable ways of living.
- c) To promote a culture of collaboration and nonviolence, one which values and respects human dignity, environmental protection, social and economic justice, tolerance of diversity, and cultural and ecological integrity.

Objectives

The course objectives are based on three levels of student performance. The first aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the Earth Charter. This is necessary in order to enable students to understand the Charter's role in the reflection and debate over its principles, and to view the document as a dynamic tool for building a global earth community. The second course objective is to focus on the basic principles and values that collectively shape the ethical code of the document. This knowledge is meant to enable the professors and course participants to gauge the relevance of the Earth Charter to their own pedagogical practice. Finally, the course is designed to lead to the development of creative proposals, incorporating the Charter principles into pedagogical practice.

Consequently, the concrete objectives set out for course participants are as follows:

- To become familiar with the values and principles of the Earth Charter
- To discover the value-added potential of the document for education for sustainable development, whether it be in academia, adult education, or other educational settings
- To develop a personal project or pedagogical model drawing on the Charter's values and principles
- To implement this project and evaluate its results

Content

The course syllabus is divided into two parts. First, the text of the Earth Charter is analyzed. Second, the course participants examine the methodological and procedural aspects required to plan and design educational projects. **The following topics are covered:**

Part I: 1. What is the Earth Charter? 2. Antecedents, influences and the process of constitution. 3. Principles and objectives.

Part II: How can the Earth Charter be used as a pedagogical tool?: preparation of personal projects.

4. The basic principles from a methodological point of view. a) Knowledge creation from the learner's point of view. b) Learning as a process: the link between the intellect and emotion. c) Think globally, act locally. d) Context analysis. e) Realizing the vision: from theory to practice. f) Problem-solving. g) Developing a creative approach. h) Envisioning alternatives and decision-making processes: future scenarios.

Procedures

The above course content is based on the assumption that the participants, mainly comprised of working professors, have already attained a level of education enabling them to learn independently and to integrate new knowledge into their everyday professional lives. The course, one semester in duration, is designed to be delivered via distance learning. This pedagogical mode of delivery comprises three main elements: bibliographical resources; student assignments and activities; and, virtual tutorials.

Bibliographic resources

Basic texts are studied to meet the course objectives, including the Earth Charter and a series of complementary texts. These resources are listed in the appendix under 'Bibliography' at the end of this article.

Activities and assignments

Autonomous learning is one of the basic pillars of an effective pedagogical model, insofar as the teaching-learning process is concerned. It is for this reason that our course distinguishes between two types of learning activities. The first is obligatory, and sets out minimum criteria that are required to obtain a satisfactory result. The second is optional, and enables selected students to 'stand out' among their peers by deepening their knowledge or achieving outstanding results.

Compulsory activities, which are presented to the educators' team in an escalating manner throughout the course, enable the instructors in charge to guide or re-direct the educational process, whenever

necessary, and to monitor and evaluate student results. In addition, this serves as an endorsement of student performance upon graduation or completion of the course. **The mandatory assignments are as follows:**

- a) A report (eight to ten pages) synthesizing the most significant lessons learned from the basic texts studied during the first trimester of the course
- b) A practical project enabling students to apply their theoretical knowledge in real or simulated contexts. This activity takes place during the second trimester, and can be carried out in the form of three possible options

The first option is the design of an educational project whose implementation requires a minimum of two weeks. This practical experience should integrate the principles and values of the Earth Charter, irrespective of the selected educational setting. At the end, the student must write a memoir including a written self-evaluation of the initial plan, difficulties encountered during the process, results, suggestions for improvement, and the didactic materials used to implement the project.

The second option consists in analyzing an ongoing educational project through the Earth Charter lens. The aim is to re-think the project from this new perspective, and to incorporate those elements of the Charter that might enhance the project's capacity to contribute to the notion of sustainable development. In terms of measuring performance, the student is required to include in the memoir a critical analysis of the former project, to identify its deficiencies and weaknesses, and to submit a proposal for improving the underlying pedagogical approach.

The third option mainly caters to those students whose professions are not related to the field of pedagogy, and involves the preparation of a data bank through online research. The aim is to gather a repertory of resources available on the Internet

about the Earth Charter, and to combine this with a list of Charter-inspired initiatives spearheaded by NGOs, international organizations, charities, and others. The final report should reflect upon: the selection criteria of the registered resources, their general characteristics (e.g. target audience of funding sources, accessibility, type of information available, educational value, etc.), as well as the overall value of the resources on a global scale.

It should be noted that a number of complementary or optional activities have also proven to be highly effective in the teaching-learning process. These include synthesizing the content of each section of the Charter and preparing a glossary with the significant terms and concepts, creating a type of personal dictionary and encyclopedia on the topic at hand.

Virtual tutorials

The third key element to achieving success in distance learning provision is virtual tutoring. This serves as an important channel of student support throughout the teaching-learning process. Traditionally, tutorial services were only available via the post and telephone. In the case of the former, this implied limited access for those geographically displaced students, although the success rates in terms of student performance have been remarkable according to studies on the topic. Nevertheless, the growing spread of new information and communications technology has been the definitive accolade for experimenting with different modes of tutoring to maximize student support.

The Internet has paved the way for fluid, and in many cases synchronous, communication, even among geographically remote or dispersed students. Virtual tutorials could be an effective pedagogical tool to be included in instructional design, and are likely to become increasingly popular as the demands for more student-teacher communication continue to rise.

Epilogue

The UNESCO Chair of Environmental Education and Sustainable Development would like to conclude by adding to the sense of hope expressed so poetically in the final section of the Earth Charter:

Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.

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Contact information:

María Novo
 UNESCO Chair of Environmental
 Education and Sustainable
 Development
 National University of Distance
 Education–UNED, Spain

Email: mnovo@edu.uned.es
www.uned.es/catedraunesco-educam