

Sustainability Education, Experiential Learning, and Social Justice: Designing Community Based Courses in the Global South

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Abstract: Understanding how we live (culture) and its impact on where we live (ecology) is one of the key issues facing sustainability and sustainability education. The International Sustainable Development Studies has developed a study abroad program for American college and university students in Thailand, “People, Ecology and Development” to address these issues through experiential studies of sustainability. Courses each semester focus on understanding the broader challenges of sustainable development through experiential studies of specific landscapes and cultures in the villages, mountains, coasts and islands throughout Thailand. This paper examines the key components of ISDSI’s programs, and provides a framework for understanding how these principles can be used to teach about sustainability within the broader context of issues of social justice and global learning more generally. Key components of the ISDSI approach include: community based learning — working with local communities to design courses that reflect community needs, knowledge and struggles; place-based learning — examining both the culture and ecology of specific locations, watersheds, bioregions, island archipelagos, etc.; experiential learning — learning through direct examination of and participation in the cultural practices (lifeways, norms, etc.) and study of ecological components (forests, coral reefs, etc.); and expedition based — learning during focused expeditions through the landscapes being studied, usually human powered (backpacking through remote mountain forests, sea kayaking between islands, etc.).

Keywords: sustainability; experiential education; place-based learning; study abroad

Understanding how we live (culture) and its impact on where we live (ecology) is one of the key issues facing sustainability and sustainability education. The International Sustainable Development Studies Institute (ISDSI) was designed to address these issues through experiential studies of sustainability. To this end ISDSI developed a study abroad program for American college and university students in Thailand, “People, Ecology and Development.” Taught in four month-long blocks, courses each semester focus on understanding the broader challenges of sustainable development through experiential studies of specific landscapes and cultures in the villages, mountains, coasts and islands throughout Thailand.

Working with marginalized communities in the Global South can present significant challenges — how to address inherent disparities in power and knowledge, and how, especially in a hierarchical society like Thailand, to ensure that local communities are not exploited *for* education, but rather are empowered *through* education. To do this, ISDSI has developed “community based courses” where local communities are involved in the development and teaching of each course — so that the courses themselves are empowering communities. As community members tell their stories and teach American students about their community, culture, ecologies and lifeways, we intentionally invert the usual knowledge/power hierarchy in these sorts of exchanges. Rather than students from the Global North coming to “help” communities in the Global South (with all of the attendant problems), communities in the Global South instead teach students from the Global North about their solutions to sustainability and provide inspiration and concrete ideas for students in the Global North to carry home to their own communities of origin.

This paper examines the key components of ISDSI’s programs, and provides a framework for understanding how these principles can be used to teach about sustainability within the broader context of issues of social justice and global learning more generally.

Key components of the ISDSI approach to sustainability education include:

- Community based learning — working with local communities to design courses that reflect community needs, knowledge and struggles.
- Place-based learning — examining both the culture and ecology of specific locations, watersheds, bioregions, island archipelagos, etc.
- Experiential learning — learning through direct examination of and participation in the cultural practices (lifeways, norms, etc.) and study of ecological components (forests, coral reefs, etc.).
- Expedition based learning — learning during focused expeditions through the landscapes being studied, usually human powered (backpacking through remote mountain forests, sea kayaking between islands, etc.).

ISDSI also offers students service learning internships, where students have a chance to work under a local non-profit/NGO or community organization after spending a semester living with and learning from marginalized people.

Experiential learning and sustainability

Teaching about sustainability can be challenging. Natural ecological systems are complex, and examining how they interact with complex social and economic systems requires understanding both social and natural sciences.

“Rather than being clear, simple and unambiguous, the concepts involved in ESD [education for sustainable development] are complex. Their complexity stems from the intricate and complicated interactions of natural and human systems. The challenge to educators is to derive messages that illustrate such complexity, without overwhelming or confusing the learner.” (McKeown, p. 30, 2002)

This inherent complexity is much easier to understand if illustrated with real world examples, allowing learners to see and experience the complexity of a forest ecosystem, and how local communities manage community forests and rotational farming systems to enhance and build the resiliency of these ecosystems. Understanding this sort of complexity is critical to understanding sustainability, but is often difficult to do in a traditional classroom setting.

“The need to teach students to appreciate and understand complexity, all agreed, is critically important but also constitutes a major challenge, as students must be able not only to grasp a diversity of disciplines and perspectives, but also to integrate them. The integration process in turn requires an understanding of certain guiding principles and techniques. In many cases, the inability to integrate disciplines is embedded in the structure and culture of the academic institution itself.” (Manning, p. 16, 1999)

Experiential learning — learning by doing with reflection — presents the educator with a tool that can both engage the learner with complicated material, and help illustrate the complexity of real world ecological and human systems.

“We can loosely define experiential education as “learning by doing with reflection.” This philosophy is based on the belief that people learn best by direct and purposeful contact with their learning experiences. Simply put, the best way to learn about problem solving is not to read about it in a book, but to actively practice solving problems in a “hands-on” setting. Such learning experiences are realistic: physically active, cognitively meaningful, and affectively engaging.” (Priest and Gass, p. 17, 1997)

There is a long tradition of experiential learning in outdoor and wilderness settings, in teaching trade craft, and other hands-on settings. By combining experiential learning with grounding foundational seminars in the theory and practice of sustainable development, ISDSI courses combining the strengths of a traditional academic setting (seminars focused on theory and literature review) with hands-on learning in the field (experiential learning about culture and ecology).

“What might such experiences do? ...they would remove the abstractness and secondhand learning that corrupts knowledge at its source. Natural objects have a concrete reality that the abstractions of textbooks and lectures do not and cannot have.” (Orr, p. 96, 1994)

Adding to this “concrete reality” of natural systems, ISDSI programs are cross-cultural — students are American college and university students, and are on a study-abroad program in Thailand. This enhances our ability to teach them experientially about ecology, culture and social justice issues, since it removes the familiar blinders that may be present when studying in a same-culture context.

“Placing participants into an unfamiliar learning environment can foster the development of a variety of beneficial dynamics. Such environments are often valuable because they present such a stark contrast to learners’ familiar environments, often allowing participants to see old behavior patterns in a new light with a richer perspective as well as permitting participants to notice behavior patterns that they may have overlooked in familiar settings.” (Priest and Gass, p. 20, 1997)

Experiential learning in a cross-cultural environment also helps with a fundamental principle of experiential learning — intrinsic rewards.

“Create situations where the consequences (positive or negative) are natural outcomes from the clients’ actions (e.g., delivered by the environment), rather than artificial ones (e.g., from the leader).” (Priest and Gass, p.24, 1997)

Learning to speak a new language allows you not only to successfully negotiate in a market for fresh fruit, but also allows you to learn directly from community members who are engaged in organic farming, mangrove conservation, and other sustainable endeavors.

As argued by McKeown, education for sustainability needs to be locally and culturally relevant — so taking students out of a familiar home-culture setting and helping them understand a new cultural and ecological context allows them to both broaden their understanding of specific cultural and ecological topics, and sustainability more generally.

“ESD [education for sustainability] carries with it the inherent idea of implementing programs that are locally relevant and culturally appropriate. All sustainable development programs including ESD must take into consideration the local environmental, economic, and societal conditions. As a result, ESD will take many forms around the world.” (McKeown, p. 13, 2002)

Place based and expedition learning

As argued by Louv (2008, 2011) and others, the current generation of students is increasingly cut off from the natural world and often unaware of basic ecological and place-based knowledge of home communities. When we ask place-based questions, students often cannot answer — What watershed is your home in? Which species of birds are residents, and which are migratory? What are the most common forest trees? Likewise, students often lack knowledge about their home economies and human systems — What contributes most to the local economy? What are the most common jobs? What challenges do small farmers and small business owners face in your community?

Ironically, perhaps, helping students become better place-based learners can often be best achieved in an unfamiliar environment. A new place is interesting, and through guided inquiry and reflection students can learn about its local culture and ecology and carry that learning back to their home-place. There, they can then make similar inquiries and learn more about where they come from themselves.

Arguing for place-based education, Orr asserts that place-based learning in the natural world will both reconnect students to natural ecosystems, as well as expand their understanding of the world more generally. Extended time — expeditions — into specific places and ecologies can then help to develop exactly the multidisciplinary understanding that is necessary in education for sustainability.

“...[A] course on a nearby river might require students to live on the river for a time, swim in it, canoe it, watch it in its various seasons, study its wildlife and aquatic animals, listen to it, and talk to people who live along it. A river become...”a microcosm of the world” and a doorway to wider knowledge. Each student might research a particular aspect of the river, say, its history, evolution, art, chemistry, ecology, literature, or the politics and law that govern its use. Collectively, a picture of the river might begin to emerge that would be more than the sum of the individual projects. I am not proposing just a weekend field trip but a longer period of time to allow the senses to soak in the experience as sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feel until something like profound respect, or more, begins to take root.” (Orr, p. 96, 1994)

What Orr is describing is an expedition into a specific place (in this case a river) where both the ecology (natural systems) and the culture (human systems) are studied. By spending extended time in these sorts of places, the inherent complexities and interactions within and between these systems can be learned. Furthermore, the result of well-designed experiential place-based courses is a better understanding not just of the place and context under study, but also of a broader set of skills for further learning about the world and challenging multidisciplinary problems.

“[I]t would give students stronger reasons to want to learn those things that require the knowledge of various disciplines... [and] it would teach the art of careful field observation and the study of place.” (Orr, p. 96, 1994)

Components of the People, Ecology and Development program

Community based learning

At ISDSI, “community based learning” refers to developing courses in partnership with local communities. Drawing on the work of Robert Chambers (1992) and others in participatory rural development research, the goal of community based learning is to help a community discover more about itself, and then effectively communicate that to outsiders — in our case American study-abroad students. This process of self-discovery can begin with community meetings,

dialog, and discussion about what makes the community unique, what struggles it faces, and how it has dealt with those struggles.

In Trang, Southern Thailand, we work with a small Muslim fishing village that is involved in mangrove conservation and restoration. The community had little experience working with outsiders, especially Westerners, and ISDSI instructors took time through a series of community meetings to talk with different sectors of the community (men, women, educators, fishermen, rubber tappers, merchants, etc.) to understand the community better, and also to help the community articulate what it felt was important. As there was already organized community action to conserve and restore mangroves, this naturally occurred through relationships within the community. With the general goal of learning about coastal resources and sustainability, the ISDSI instructor team worked with the community to help discover its own stories, and then through home stays, village meetings, guided experiential inquiry, and other activities, to help teach about its own history, struggles, and resource-base.

Community based learning does have goals (e.g., learning about mangrove ecology), and is not completely unstructured. However, the structure can vary and change depending on the current issues and concerns of the local community. By working in dialog with the community, ISDSI instructors ensure that the courses are relevant and also current with topics in academic study (e.g., marine resource depletion, etc.).

A challenging part of community-based courses is that there is, by design and necessity, a certain amount of giving up of control over the course. Even with generally agreed upon goals and field activities, community-based courses do not allow a high degree of control. Both the local community and the local ecology are variable. Since the course is experiential, and in the case cited above, in a marine environment, wind, waves, tides, and other outside forces can impact what and how course topics are taught. A key community instructor might be called away fishing, or a local leader might be unable to attend due to a community crisis or other issue. What makes it work (aside from a high tolerance for ambiguity) is a broad understanding of the community, and flexibility in teaching and learning assignments.

Finally, as pointed out by Robert Chambers and others involved in participatory development, this sort of community work is not empowering unless the communities have ownership and the right to say no. Especially in a hierarchical and indirect society like Thailand, it would be easy to impose a course and students on a community. However, by giving up control and allowing the community to own the course, it is then better able to articulate its own needs to government officials, donor agencies, and NGOs. Empowerment, then, happens through giving a community a chance to tell its own stories in its own ways. Later, when confronted with a conflict over resource management and new government regulations, for example, a community can better articulate how and why these cultural practices are sustainable and are restoring its resource base or how, with support, it might need to become more sustainable.

This is especially important with marginalized communities, as they often do not have a voice and are unable to tell their stories. All of the communities that ISDSI works with are marginalized, either geographically (rural, mountain, coast, and island communities), economically (poor and/or subsistence based), ethnically (tribal, minority, etc.), or religiously.

Giving voice to the voiceless is intrinsically empowering. As a local activist talking with a frustrated group of ISDSI students who wanted to “do something” about the problems of the poor explained, “Listening is powerful — yes the poor and powerless lack resources, but what they really lack is a voice. Giving them that chance to tell their stories is giving them a voice. And once you find your voice, you are able to find power.”

Place-based learning

Place-based learning, as referred to above by Orr, focuses on a specific location or ecosystem. The courses for ISDSI’s *People, Ecology and Development* program are all based on the intensive study of place. The course on sustainable food systems and agroecology is done on lowland farms in the Mae Taa valley south of Chiang Mai, as well as upland communities north of Chiang Mai in Fang district. Both places (Mae Taa and Fang) become “the textbook” as students learn about the watershed, what crops can and cannot be grown there, the history of the landscape, how ancient irrigation systems are built and maintained, and how the local communities have dealt with the problem of creating a sustainable life in the midst of pressure to turn to chemically based cash crops, rather than to continue sustainable farming techniques.

In our course on people and forests, the students travel between a group of ethnic minority Karen villages, and study the forest and their long cycle swidden farming systems. Under pressure from the national government to leave their ancestral home with the recent zoning as a national park, the Karen have generations of knowledge about the forests, streams, mountains, and fields. This place in the rugged mountains of Mae Hong Son is the classroom where students learn — going with host families to work the fields, hiking up through a conservation forest with village elders and local instructors, and living the rhythms of village life. The Karen have a strong conservation ethic and teach about how each aspect of traditional culture is designed to be sustainable, and about the challenges of maintaining that in the face of both external and internal pressure.

The course on the cultures and ecologies of the Andaman Sea focuses on two places — the small Muslim fishing village mentioned above, as well as an island archipelago, the home of the Urak Lawoi people. On the coast, the place-based study focuses on the mangroves, mud flats, and sea grass beds of the coastal zone. Activities include local instructors from the village teaching about mangrove ecology, sea grass studies of biodiversity, mud flat explorations with host families, as well as sea kayaking and skin diving in the mangroves. In the islands, activities include paddling between islands, diving on coral reefs, and learning about conservation ecology and the struggles of the Urak Lawoi transitioning from a semi-nomadic lifestyle to a settled lifestyle within a marine national park while facing a shrinking resource base.

In all of these settings (fields, forests, and oceans), landscape is the key component of place-based education. By combining scientific field studies of each ecosystem (transects of forests, biodiversity studies of reefs, etc.) with instruction from local community members, students can understand more about the specific place as well as how it has shaped the culture, and how human impacts and culture shape the landscape.

Because sustainability is concerned with the sustainable use of the resource base, place-based studies are especially effective in two ways. First, they can demonstrate local use and impact of

human culture on the resource base as well as restoration and sustainable use. Second, placed in context, links can be made to broader biosphere level changes such as global warming and ocean acidification. This brings a “concrete reality” to the readings and theory about sustainable development, and can help students understand how things actually look and work in context.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning, learning by doing with reflection, is challenging to do well. While an experience alone can be meaningful, to create an excellent experiential learning course requires a lot of work to find appropriate time for reflection and writing, as well as field activities that are congruent with the overall focus of the course.

On ISDSI courses, the first week of the block is spent in Chiang Mai, focused on theory and background/context studies. Following this week, students spend the next three weeks on an expedition field course. During this phase, experiential learning occurs in a number of ways, both structured and unstructured.

Structured learning occurs through meetings with local community members to talk over and reflect on what students are learning, as well as to listen to the stories of the community and its concerns. Structured learning in the field can occur through both scientific field studies designed to help students understand ecological concepts and issues (e.g. a biodiversity survey of a reef or forest transect) as well as through community-led studies of issues such as mangrove conservation and restoration or forest ecology.

Unstructured or semi-structured experiential learning occurs during home stays and family days where students live and work alongside host families, farming, fishing, and otherwise learning what day-to-day life is like in the communities in which they are learning.

In all of these activities, the goals and objectives of the course are reinforced through essays, written reflections, field seminars, and a final exam. The purpose of the writing and reflection is to help students make sense of the complexity they are experiencing, and to give them a chance to stop and reflect on what they have learned and on what questions they are still trying to answer.

All of the experiential learning activities carry with them the chance to learn by doing, make mistakes, improve the next time, develop comfort in learning and studying outside the classroom, and begin to make sense by drawing connections that are not obviously apparent from reading textbooks and articles or watching presentations about sustainability.

Expedition-based learning

Finally, ISDSI courses are expedition-based. Our “Expedition Field Courses” are designed to have students travel through the landscape so that they are able to experience the fields, mountains, forests, and oceans first-hand. Human-powered travel where possible helps to slow down the pace of movement and more deeply connect students to the natural world they are studying.

For example, in the course focusing on the culture and ecologies of the Andaman Sea, students kayak between islands in the Adang Archipelago. This requires an understanding of the landscape, tides, currents, weather, sunrise, and sunset, as well as of the strength and endurance of the group and the daily academic goals. It also requires dialog with local Urak Lawoi instructors so that student leaders for each day understand how the currents flow on an ebb tide, when to leave the beach, and how the wind and waves react to an approaching storm.

By traveling through the landscape on their own power, students gain a much deeper understanding of the landscape and the ecosystem upon which their host communities depend. Poor planning can lead (and has led) to very long days as students struggle to paddle against a current — reinforcing the need for local knowledge and the leadership and expedition skills to read a tide chart and keep the group on schedule. As students develop expedition competency, however, they become more comfortable in the local environment and are better able to understand the life, stories, and struggles of the host communities. A village elder explaining the challenge of dealing with a storm at sea in a small boat has much greater relevance to a student who has paddled the same waters in a sea kayak and knows first-hand the islands and reefs being discussed.

Through expedition learning, students are also able to focus on a single topic at one time. The block system of teaching is very well suited to experiential field-based expeditions; within a single landscape, while complex, each place and field study is related to the broader context of the landscape. This helps control the somewhat chaotic and complex nature of sustainability studies, as students can start to draw comparisons between different expeditions and to see the links between forest communities, coastal fishing villages, and lowland farmers. Different landscapes with similar problems, struggles, and concerns all focused around the broader issue of sustainable living.

Conclusion

Education for sustainability deals with some of the most challenging issues of our time — how to manage a world with a declining resource base and growing population and consumption demands. These same pressures on resources, however, have been faced by marginalized populations, in some cases for generations. By learning from marginalized communities in the Global South, ISDSI courses seek to help students learn about how local communities are meeting the current challenges of sustainability, and how this might then be applied to their own home communities in the Global North.

We have found that the key to a successful educational program focused on sustainability is to make it community-based, experiential, place-based, and expeditionary — allowing for extended time in the communities and landscapes being studied. This allows time to build rapport with local communities and allows our students to step into the day-to-day lives of the communities they are living with and learning from.

As education for sustainability matures and develops, an increasing focus on the social justice issues inherent in the distribution of resources and the costs of development is critical. By

engaging directly with the people and places where these resource constraints are already being felt, students and educators can gain insights into possible futures and problems, and possibilities for solving those problems. Learning from communities in the Global South requires respect, investment of time in building relationships, and giving up a certain amount of control. The challenges are very much worth it, however, as it has proven to be extremely rewarding for the students, teachers and the communities involved.

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