

Towards healthy sustainable communities: a journey of learning, critical thought and creativity

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Abstract

Educating our future planning, property, housing, geography, energy and climate change specialists about the influence of the built environment on health and sustainability is a fundamental component of their learning. However, trying to get first year students to grasp the complexity and breadth of what constitutes a healthy sustainable community and why it is important is no mean feat. This paper, from the perspectives of past student, Ben Hockman, and new lecturer, Sarah Burgess, reflects on the approach taken in the Healthy Sustainable Communities module to address this challenge. With an emphasis on participatory learning, the module seeks to engage students in the topic and emphasises the need for individual thought, research and motivation. Whilst the students are initially averse to this approach, Ben Hockman identifies the benefits that he gained as a student as well as the lessons of hind-sight that he is able share with current students as a Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) leader for the module. Sarah Burgess shares her experience in assisting with the delivery of the module and in assisting students to think creatively about health, sustainability and the built environment.

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Ben Hockman is a second year planning student who completed the Healthy Sustainable Communities module in 2010.

The education of our future planning, property, housing, geography, energy and climate change specialists about the influence of the built environment on health and sustainability is a fundamental component of their learning. A large part of the degree courses in these subjects are focussed on the complexity and breadth of sustainability and the exploration of what constitutes a healthy sustainable community. As an introduction to this multifarious subject area the first year module, Healthy Sustainable Communities, seeks to introduce students to the components of sustainable development and give them the opportunity to explore the complex relationships between the global ecosystem, people and place. The year-long module brings together students of planning, property, housing, geography, energy and climate change, taking them 'on a journey from the theory of sustainable development and healthy settings to experiments with practical implementation' (Grant, 2010). Throughout the module the emphasis is on participatory learning, seeking to engage students in the topic and emphasising the need for individual thought, research and motivation.

The module is divided into four consecutive 'blocks' of teaching with each building on the previous block. The first block starts with core principles and concepts, such as sustainable development, systems theory and the ecosystem approach, which form the background to block two, which seeks to deconstruct sustainability and health. Blocks three and four, in the second semester, apply the principles and analysis from the first semester through a practical project in which students design a new healthy and sustainable community. A self-guided site visit to three Bristol suburbs and a week-long residential field trip allow students to evaluate real environments and analyse their positive and negative aspects.

The weekly class is divided into a lecture and a workshop session. The workshops provide an opportunity for students to explore concepts covered in the lecture and to encourage them to investigate and question different theories and their application. These lectures are complimented with a significant amount of self-directed study and group work, particularly in the first half of the module. This level of independent and group working within and outside of the classes requires critical thinking and exploration, but also a high level of dedication and motivation from the students. The realisation by students that this module is about active learning is one of the most important aspects that they need to manage.

The second half of the module is much more focussed on independent work, with students having time during the class session to work on and discuss the development of their ideas for their coursework submission. After a volley of theories, concepts and behaviours over the first semester, this second half of the module is when students are able to develop and test their understandings of what constitutes a healthy sustainable community in relation to a real site. The field trip to Rotterdam also spurs much debate amongst the students as they are able to experience first-hand the principles and concepts that they have been studying (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Healthy Sustainable Communities module students on the field trip to Rotterdam looking at an example of a healthy and sustainable neighbourhood in Rotterdam (Source: Grant, M. Rotterdam, April 2010)

The student-focused nature of the lectures and coursework requires evaluation and analysis, problem-solving and reflection. The application of case studies allows students to experience a deeper level of learning. These methods enable learning to be long lasting, and equips students with skills that will be invaluable in their future professions. The scope of the module is such that students are actively encouraged to focus on a particular theme or issue throughout the year. In this way, students have the opportunity to be inspired by and engage with the subject area; to find their area of personal interest; to pursue that interest; and to integrate the interest into their coursework. The opportunity to work with students on different courses is also a useful insight into the roles and activities of different disciplines, as well as the valuable experience of group work.

The integrative approach used in Healthy Sustainable Communities immerses students in key concepts and theories critical to their future careers. Students are supported and guided throughout the year by a team of four tutors who support students, helping them to understand complex fields of enquiry and encourage creativity and critical thinking. One of the biggest challenges is in synthesising all the ongoing research and best practice which is introduced through the module into a clearly presented proposal with a legible narrative. This offers the opportunity to develop expertise in new theory or practice; knowledge that makes good grounding for work further into the degree course. The comparison of the coursework proposals for a real site with typical and ongoing development for the same or similar sites enables a deeper understanding of the barriers to sustainable development in the world of practice. (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Students undertaking a site analysis of the Harry Stoke site on which they develop proposals for a healthy sustainable community (Source: Grant, M. Bristol, January 2010)

The introduction of the Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme provides an informal forum in which students can explore the themes and topics covered in lectures and wider reading to get to grips with the concepts and applying them to their own experiences. As there are constant developments in the field and many of these relate to quite emotive subjects, discussion at the PAL sessions can often become very animated. By linking these issues back to the module content, another means for students to relate the theory to current development practice is provided.

There are so many interrelated issues to get to grips with in the Healthy Sustainable Communities module. As such, whole hearted engagement from students is certainly a prerequisite to success. Knowledge and skills acquired or enhanced through the Healthy Sustainable Communities module come to the fore in subsequent modules across the range of degree courses involved, but crucially, they equip students with the invaluable skills that are needed to create healthy and sustainable places of the future.

References

Grant, M (2010) *Module Guide: Healthy Sustainable Communities*, Bristol: UWE