Teaching Green Entrepreneurship to High School Students
by Vera Petkantchin

I have always been a firm believer in the importance of conserving nature, but before entering the world of entrepreneurship education I perceived it as an area reserved only for NGOs. In time, I began to realise just how much the fields of business and of nature conservation could benefit from intertwining their goals in a coherent journey toward sustainability, for the sake of the whole planet and its inhabitants. The world’s environmental challenges can be solved with the emergence of a new entrepreneurial mindset that deeply respects the natural world and understands that society cannot survive and thrive by continuing to erode its natural foundations. There must be a way for a new consciousness to emerge, on a global scale: one that transcends simple consumerism and the search for financial profit above all else. This new consciousness needs to be sincerely and genuinely embedded into the visions, missions, products, and concrete actions of companies. In my work, I advocate for entrepreneurship education as a way to foster a new generation of “doers”, and I act upon this conviction. We must be passionate about equipping this generation with the understanding that business can no longer be successful unless it embraces the environmental and social dimension with its heart and soul. The earlier this process starts in the life of an individual, the better.

Our Story
In this story, I describe how the Junior Achievement Bulgaria team has delivered learning experiences in green entrepreneurship to high school students from Bulgaria and Norway, what the benefits have been for the students involved, and how we have set out to enlarge our positive impact by entering into new, meaningful partnerships for the future.

Why Teach Green Entrepreneurship?
Have you ever had the uncanny feeling that a new product advertised as the next big innovation, in fact comes across to you as something you could easily live without? Yes, this new mobile application might have a few more convenient features than others, but so what? You buy and then forget, consume and throw away, and then perhaps feel empty and in need of yet another novelty to distract you. I argue that a massive number of products and services available today worldwide do not quench a burning need or solve an intractable problem. That is why we get bored of them so quickly. To me, this is a squandering of talent, creativity, and resources, given the myriad of tangible and very serious environmental and social problems that exist all over the world.

From as early as the 1930s, entrepreneurship has been seen as a process of “creative destruction”. Entrepreneurs are the engines of change in a market economy. Schumpeter wrote in 1942 that: “[t]he fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the new consumers’ goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organisation that capitalist enterprise creates... The capitalist process in much the same way in which it destroyed the institutional framework of feudal society also undermines its own.”

Perhaps our today’s is reaching this tipping point, and it is time to rethink, and change, the dominant model of consumer economy, which is increasingly limited by the exhaustion of natural resources and the degradation of the environment. The signs that social attitudes are moving away from a focus on financial profit and towards increasing cooperation among people are everywhere: open software, Wikipedia, Couchsurfing, and Zipcar are but a few examples of this new way of thinking, that views sharing as a return to normality, even in highly individualistic Western societies.

As always, the role of the entrepreneur will be key in this process, but in order for the change to be just (in terms of society and the environment), we need to foster a new consciousness of respect for nature and the land. Only then will the new economic models become a true challenge to the status quo, and be able to lead humanity onto a new, superior trail of development. One of the important mechanisms
“Business without spirit, trade without compassion, industry without ecology, finance without fairness, economics without equity can only bring the breakdown of society and destruction of the natural world. Only when spirit and business work together can humanity find coherent purpose.” -- Satish Kumar

by which this could happen is through educating young people on the principles of green entrepreneurship.

In order to do that, our team at Junior Achievement Bulgaria (together with our partners from our sister organisation Ungt Entreprenorskap Sogn og Fjordane, Norway) developed the project “Green Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Development” (funded through the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area). At the heart of this project is the belief that people can grow up with new values to embed into their future business methods, so that the false and ruinous conflict between economic activity and the preservation of nature can be put to an end. Conscientious, constructive entrepreneurship, built around the principles of sustainability, is the force that can provide this necessary new impulse: not so much because this type of entrepreneurship is quickly becoming an economic imperative, but because it has to come from the heart and soul of everyone. Only then will our society achieve lasting change.

Learning Aims and Outcomes

Our main goal was to provide an extracurricular education in the form of blended learning (online combined with face-to-face), through which young people aged 15-19, from Bulgaria and Norway, could learn about the essence of green business. We wanted to create a source through which high school students could gain systemised and practical knowledge of the environmental challenges facing the planet, while developing skills needed to connect entrepreneurship with nature conservation, in order to realise green business ideas. Another goal was to transfer knowledge of eco innovations from Norway to Bulgaria, and share examples of disruptive new green business models from around the world.

The blended learning model, that we developed and tested with 80 students, proved to be very suitable for their learning needs, and led to impressive learning outcomes. Our model combined the capabilities of digital technologies to provide theoretical knowledge with the excitement of practically-oriented, face-to-face interaction. The benefits for students who took part in the online course and Eco Camp can be summarised as follows:

- Improved understanding of sustainable development and the essence of green business.
- Improved skills for sustainable business planning.
- Improved skills for communication and work in an interactive learning environment.
- Increased inclination toward starting their own sustainable business.
- Exposure, through the guest lecturers, to alternative theories and practical examples of how economic subjects can embed the contemporary requirements of the green economy into their activities.
- Improved skills for self-directed research, in response to a given task.

Definitions

Green entrepreneurship:
“taking responsibility to create the world we want”
(Gustav Berle, 1991)

Eco-preneur / green entrepreneur:
“one who creates green-green businesses in order to radically transform the economic sector in which he or she operates”
(Robert Isaak, 2002)

Green-green business:
“one that is designed to be green in its processes and products from scratch, as a start-up, and, furthermore, is intended to transform socially the industrial sector in which it is located towards a model of sustainable development”
(Robert Isaak, 1998)
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- Improved skills for teamwork from a distance, through online communication.
- Improved skills for face-to-face teamwork.
- Improved skills for intercultural communication.
- Development of creativity and innovative thinking.

Another important result of the course is the long-term effect it has had on the formation of attitudes and entrepreneurial behaviour for sustainable business among the participants. Two of the teams from the Eco Camp went on to develop their ideas and apply for national and international business idea competitions.

The Learning Process

In the first phase, students gained theoretical knowledge of sustainable development, green entrepreneurship, and the ways in which they can help preserve biodiversity and the planet's ecosystems. The second phase was more practically oriented: the participants met in person, spent a week together, and worked to develop concrete ideas for green business.

We built an online platform, where all students were registered, and all video lectures were published after being uploaded to YouTube. Every participant had an online profile, enabling them to view lectures and supplementary materials, comment on discussion questions, solve quizzes and submit their individual and group assignments. All twenty-four lectures can be viewed (after free registration) on the platform: http://green.jabulgaria.org.

We published two quizzes and one teamwork assignment. The assignment asked students to research and identify one company with a poor track record of environmental damage, that had reversed its production practices and become a sustainability leader, and one company that used greenwashing.
techniques to boost its image without taking any real and effective action for sustainable development. A final, individual assignment was also published, in which participants were asked to describe their own idea for a sustainable business.

2 One-week Eco Camp in Rodopi Mountains in Bulgaria

We chose the participants for this one-week Eco Camp on the basis of activity and motivation shown during the online course, as well as on educational performance. We had a total of forty students from Bulgaria and Norway, who didn’t know each other and had previously only communicated online. We chose to hold the camp in a small village in the Rodopi Mountains, where students were accommodated in small family-run guesthouses rather than being isolated in a big all-inclusive hotel. This gave them the opportunity to dive into the village’s atmosphere, communicate with their hosts, and eat local, home-cooked food. Furthermore, this contributed to the local economy, and helped us to realise one of the key goals of the project: to embed sustainability into all of our actions.

The purpose of the Eco Camp was to give students an opportunity to put the theoretical knowledge gained on the online course into practice. The program was packed with teamwork games, practical activities, excursions and seminars.

A team-building treasure hunt was organised at the start of the camp, to give the mixed teams of students a chance to get to know one another. One of the challenges of this exercise was to introduce themselves to as many local people as possible.

The program included two practical workshops: one on business idea generation and analysis through the business model canvas, and one on innovative business ideas and adaptation to climate change. In the second workshop, we used a game developed by Princeton University and originally aimed at university students. It turned out to be a very useful tool for high school students as well.

Students visited three small, environmental businesses in the region: a boutique producer of yoghurt, a bio-shop and a horseback-riding farm. Most of the participants shared that they found these visits extremely valuable, because they had made the connection between talking about green business and its actual realisation.

The last two days of the Eco Camp were devoted to the JA innovation camp format. The eight teams received a challenge which they had to solve within twenty-four hours. They were challenged to develop an innovative green business idea that would influence as many ordinary people as possible to change their everyday lifestyle and make it more sustainable. The teams could use only the Internet, and the advice of 4 business mentors, to shape their ideas. We encouraged them to get out of the building, look for, and talk to their first potential customers: the inhabitants of and visitors to the village. Some of the teams took this task very seriously, and managed to talk to scores of people about their ideas. Others decided to use Facebook and collect opinions online. Finally, the teams had to pitch their ideas in front of an audience and a panel of judges. A link to the YouTube playlist where all the presentations can be watched is available here: https://youtu.be/BUlpxkoRmk?list=PLJfuaTGnNbf9H3xi_XSiOxyY-2jrsV18.

The solutions presented by teams were wide-ranging: a platform for adopting bee hives and supporting apiary products; an eco-restaurant providing educational courses on how to adopt a greener lifestyle; an eco-gym, where people could produce energy while working out; a platform and mobile app, that connects young people who enjoy hiking and volunteering with mountain hut owners; a reality show and TV challenge, where celebrities challenge ordinary people to perform green actions. These were just a few of the participants’ ideas.
Lessons Learned

Although the survey results showed, as expected, that students preferred the face-to-face Eco Camp to the online course, we observed that the course was crucial to preparing them theoretically to generate far more sensible and profound solutions to the given challenge. Had we left out the course and held only a one-week camp, this would not have been the case.

However, we still see many opportunities for the improvement of the online course:

- Increasing the interactive nature of the video lectures.
- Enlarging the thematic pool of lectures.
- Inviting guest lecturers to share success stories in real time (the guests could also be invited by the course participants themselves).
- Assigning students to write their own scenarios and film their own video lectures.
- Introducing live discussions, through Google Hangouts or other platforms.

When working with high school students, and offering an extracurricular course, one needs to take the school calendar into account. The most appropriate time to deliver the online course would be toward the beginning or middle of the school year, when students have more free time to focus on their course assignments. Our course ran from April to June: the busiest period for students, and that affected their level of engagement, especially after the exam period in late May.

What’s in Store for the Future?

We are not stopping here. We have already confirmed the continuation of our partnership with our Norwegian friends, and we will bring the Bulgarian students to Norway for a second edition of the Eco Camp in October 2015. This will bring even more benefits to the students, deepening their interest in green entrepreneurship and further developing their skills.

We have also attracted organisations from other European countries, in a partnership that will seek to further work on the methodology we have piloted and make it widely available to teachers across the continent, so that they can create and implement their own educational modules on green entrepreneurship.

Resources

To find out more about 'Green Entrepreneurship' please go to the Coneeect online compendium and search for 'Green'.

To get you started, take a look at:

http://green.jabulgaria.org - the online platform with video lectures. They are freely accessible after registration.
https://organis.youtube.com/watch?v=1KQHjPbXzw4 - online promo video of the online course.

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I am a senior manager with eight years of experience in the field of entrepreneurship education. I am mission-driven, versatile and flexible, and usually the first to follow a “crazy” dreamer with a great idea to make the world a better place. I am experienced in working with EU projects, in international networks, as well as in designing and implementing training with an emphasis on practical activities and links with business mentors. In 2010, I co-authored the textbook “Marketing and Advertising” aimed at the 12th grade in specialized high schools in Bulgaria, where I designed the topics related to business ethics. I run a program on social entrepreneurship as part of JA Bulgaria’s portfolio, and am actively involved in the formation of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem in the country. I am a firm believer in volunteering and I regularly contribute to biodiversity protection in my country. I am extremely interested in sharing and collaboration.

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