

Productive sustainability discourse through insisting on diverse perspectives

Perhaps the most important step in making a course interdisciplinary is to attract students with a variety of interests and disciplines congruent with the primary pillars and concerns of sustainability to concurrently enroll in the same section. Too often classes consist primarily of students with an identical focus or set of concerns, potentially leading to group think. For example, engineering courses often consist of students who want to build and think that technology can solve our problems. They tend to be problem solvers, not problem understanders.

Progress on the front of sustainability requires students and instructors alike to look deeper into our problems in an attempt to tease out their roots. Well entrenched disciplinary silos guide us to address views on sustainability through the lens of our expertise. It's no different with students. Encouraging peer to peer interaction via group work or online forums has been an effective way for differing perspectives (disciplinarity) to be brought to bear on the subject matter.

Supposing a work group consists of a geoscientists, an engineer, a business major, an economists, and political scientists. We can hope such a pairing will provide the fodder necessary for interdisciplinary discourse and perspectives to be involved in the group work and learning process.

Interdisciplinarity does extend beyond the diversity of the students in a class. The instructor also needs to present multiple perspectives on issues of concern. Often the differing perspectives provide conflicting results and these have to be explored head on. Brushing conflicting or difficult ideas under the rug only serves to disenfranchise students spirited and motivated to make change.