

STIMULATING SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION IN MARKETING STUDENTS THROUGH ACTIVE AND CREATIVE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The academic literature recognizes the crucial role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting sustainable development (Chaleta et al., 2021; Ramos Torres, 2021; Serafini et al., 2022; Zamora-Polo & Sánchez-Martín, 2019). HEIs must equip future professionals with the necessary skills to address sustainability challenges (García-Feijoo et al., 2020), given that students are their central actors (Filho et al., 2024). To this end, HEIs and teachers have increasingly integrated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into curricula to enhance students' awareness and competencies in sustainability (Kopnina, 2020; Leal Filho, 2021).

Sustainability education in higher education seeks to cultivate change agents capable of tackling complex environmental challenges (Ramchunder et al., 2021). However, due to its multifaceted nature, traditional content-focused teaching methods may prove ineffective (Cottafava et al., 2019). Instead, integrating active, participatory, and experiential learning within real-world contexts fosters deeper understanding and meaningful engagement (Ramchunder et al., 2021).

To address learning challenges in sustainability education, pedagogical methodologies such as project-based and problem-based learning are recommended, as they promote active engagement through real-world problem-solving and decision-making tasks (Leal Filho et al., 2016). Furthermore, sustainability education benefits from diverse innovative pedagogical approaches, including active learning, formative analytics, research-based learning, transformative learning, and collaborative learning. All these methods enhance student engagement and positively impact learning performance (Lian et al., 2024).

This study aims to present an innovative pedagogical approach in higher education by integrating sustainability education with active and creative learning methodologies.

Recognizing the importance of engaging students and fostering their interest in sustainability, a pedagogical practice was implemented at the University of Aveiro during the 2023/2024 academic year. This initiative involved third-year students enrolled in the Marketing and Business Planning course within the Marketing degree program. The primary objective was to raise students' awareness of sustainability, inspiring them to incorporate sustainability principles into their future professional actions and behaviors, thereby contributing to a more sustainable world.

To achieve this objective, students conducted in-depth interviews with a convenience sample to assess participants' knowledge of the SDGs and their perceptions and attitudes toward sustainable development. After analyzing the interview responses, students identified key trends in sustainability awareness and engagement. The findings revealed:

1. Varied levels of sustainability awareness: While some participants were entirely unfamiliar with the SDGs, others had only a vague understanding, and a minority demonstrated deeper knowledge of specific goals.
2. Diverse perspectives on responsibility for sustainability efforts: Participants expressed differing opinions on whether sustainability should be primarily driven by individuals, businesses, or governments.

The final discussion by students highlighted specific sustainability-aligned behaviors among participants, as well as areas where knowledge about the SDGs and engagement remained limited. Some concerns and challenges related to sustainability education were addressed in the reflections.

This pedagogical approach significantly enhanced students' understanding of sustainable development and critical thinking skills. The findings suggest that integrating creative methodologies and direct stakeholder engagement into SDG-focused education effectively develops key sustainability competencies. By fostering real-world discussions through interviews, this approach not only improved students' research and analytical skills but also deepened their reflection on sustainability challenges and individual responsibilities in achieving the SDGs. These results align with existing literature, which asserts that integrating active and participatory learning within real-world contexts fosters deeper understanding and meaningful engagement (e.g., Lian et al., 2024; Ramchunder et al., 2021).

The study's preliminary findings highlight the effectiveness of combining creative and research-based learning in sustainability education. Students not only reported increased awareness and understanding of the SDGs but also demonstrated greater motivation to apply sustainable principles in their future professional contexts. By engaging in real-world interactions and qualitative analysis, students developed essential competencies such as critical thinking, stakeholder empathy, and communication skills. These outcomes underscore the value of embedding active, participatory methodologies into sustainability curricula. As a contribution to the field, this study provides a replicable pedagogical framework that may be adapted across disciplines to foster deeper student engagement and actionable sustainability learning outcomes. Further iterations of this approach may refine its impact and broaden its applicability across higher education settings.

By showcasing a practical example of innovative pedagogy, this study advances the discussion on effective teaching approaches and skills development in sustainability education. Additionally, it offers potential for replication and further methodological enhancement in other educational contexts.

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