Student Tutorial: Introducing Real-World Learning Experiences

Purpose
This tutorial will introduce you to Real-World Learning Experiences (RWLE). RWLEs are class activities that use a student-directed, collaborative approach to sustainability education that will help you develop your sustainability knowledge and problem-solving skills through real-world experiences. The tutorial will help you think about why this approach to learning is valuable for sustainability education, provide tips for what you can do to succeed in this type of learning environment, and give you some basic information and resources to use along the way!

What are Real-World Learning Experiences?
Real-World Learning Experiences (RWLEs) are experiences that connect you with people, places, and organizations that can give you unique insight and information about sustainability problems and solutions that you can't get through regular readings and lectures alone. They help you to explore the relation between theory and practice. RWLEs are designed using a problem- and project-based learning (PPBL) approach, which emphasizes self-directed learning, collaboration, collaboration with peers and the broader public, and solution-oriented work in a real-world context, so they provide you with an opportunity to develop skills that will be highly valuable both in your education and in your future career (Brundiers, Wiek, and Redman, 2010). During these experiences, instructors become coaches and mentors, “guides on the side rather than sages on the stage,” as one instructor puts it (Henderson, personal communication), while you take primary responsibility for directing your learning (Hung, 2011).

The School of Sustainability has developed a model of RWLEs to help you develop your sustainability competence (Brundiers, Wiek, and Redman, 2010; Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman, 2011). There are four levels of RWLE, one for each level of your bachelor’s program. As the figure below shows, each level builds on the next, progressively increasing your ability to thrive in this type of learning environment and your ability to do sustainability research and work.

In 100 level RWLEs, you bring the world into the classroom through activities like guest lectures, student panel discussions, newspaper reading, and documentary watching, learning how and why sustainability problems and solutions are place-based and contextual and what it means. Students learn to collaborate with peers in the classroom to complete tasks directed by instructors to study sustainability problem and solution contexts. Teamwork, active listening and discussion, and identifying and analyzing presented sustainability problems and solutions are the key mastery goals at this level.
In 200 level RWLEs, you visit the world through experiences like field trips, walking audits, participant observation, and volunteering. Exposure to place is a powerful element in these activities. Place and context speak to students and impact them, transferring information about sustainability problems and problem solving that students could not get in the classroom (e.g., sensory, experiential, perceptions). Students learn to collaborate with peers and interact with people outside of class to complete tasks still directed by instructors but that demand more responsibility and critical thinking from students. Professionalism, time and task management, empathy, self-reflection, recognition of course concepts in real-world contexts are key mastery goals at this level, as is evaluation of sustainability problems and solutions.

By this point in the program, students are prepared to take a more active role in RWLEs. In 300 RWLEs, you simulate the world through experiences like role plays, debates, and games, in which they take on specific roles and responsibilities of decision-makers and stakeholders in hypothetical sustainability problem and solution contexts. Students learn to complete tasks increasingly self- or peer-directed while engaging in simulated problem solving. Conceptual problem-solving, empathy,
appreciation of pluralism, and decision making under uncertainty are key mastery goals at this level.

In 400 level RWLEs, you engage with the world, through experiences like collaborative and independent projects, continuing to learn through experience but also applying what they have learned to create change. Students collaborate with peers, community partners, and stakeholders to complete tasks primarily managed by students. Key mastery goals at this level are project management, stakeholder engagement, and crafting and testing of sustainability solution options.

RWLEs aren’t just any experience you have outside of the classroom. They are rich and tested learning opportunities. They require that you connect your out-of-class experience with readings and research to contextualize, analyze, explain and resolve what you learn with the broader body of literature and important background information. Remember, RWLE like panel presentations, walking audits, games, and collaborative projects get you in contact with real-world contexts. The associated assignments give you a chance to digest this experience and weave its lessons into others from your class and program. This way, you are actively producing important knowledge and skills.

Why is this learning approach valuable to you?

RWLEs get you out of your seats, and often out of the classroom. They engage all of your senses and invite you to be an active participant in your education. They give you chances to tap into the vast pool of information and knowledge that is held by people, by ecosystems, by the built environment. You can access this information by observing and asking questions. Not only do RWLEs give you the opportunity to gain unique insight and information, they also help you practice methods and develop skills and attitudes that will eventually enable you to do sustainability research and work that engages experts from other disciplines and fields, as well as stakeholders and others with unique insight and ideas to create “use-inspired” sustainability solutions” that “leverage place” (Crow, 2008). As one student wrote after a collaborative project,

“This project allowed me to learn about and interact with the desert ecosystem surrounding my family’s home. Although I had previously appreciated its beauty, this project opened my eyes to how vital it is for my own health and happiness to cultivate a deeper relationship with nature. Additionally, I will take away a fantastic first experience in applying the lessons and skills sets I have learned so far at the School of Sustainability to a real-world situation. I have been able to develop my interpersonal skills of communication and cooperation and have seen how diversity can make a project that much more interesting and worthwhile.”

What can you do to succeed?

There are many factors in making a RWLE a success and one of the most important is you.

Take ownership of the experience. Taking ownership looks different at different levels. At the 100 level in, say, a guest lecture this might involve listening actively, trying to make links between the speaker’s stories and course concepts or themes, and asking critical questions
in the Q and A session. At the 400 level, on the other hand, taking ownership may involve actually being in charge of managing a project with a business, government body or not-for-profit organization as the project partner (“client”) or planning an event, e.g., a panel discussion on sustainable water management that invites scholars (students, professors) and practitioners (e.g., representatives from the utilities, a city official, from a nature advocacy group).

**Work for performance not grade.** You have been trained for years to worry about grades, and to ask “what do I have to do to get an A?” It can be hard to reframe this question, but doing so is important because it will help you be more reflective and reflexive in your learning. It also helps you to pay attention to your learning strategies and to explore how to improve them. Try shifting this question to,

- what are the goals of this RWLE?
- what can it teach me - what do I know, what do I want to know?,
- what do I have to do/learn in order to complete this assignment,
- how can I demonstrate that I’ve achieved the learning objectives of the RWLE?
- how effective was my approach to learning? How can I improve it next time?

**Be a team player.** Many RWLEs are collaborative, they involve working with peers, interacting with or even engaging experts and stakeholders in co-creating knowledge. Peer-learning is a big part of RWLEs. This helps you to become aware of your strengths and gaps in knowledge and skills: share your strengths and fill in gaps either through own learning or partnering with others. Remember the Golden Rule (treat others as you want to be treated), and practice empathy for the people you work with. Marris (2004) has lots of tips, techniques, and tools *Teamwork: A Practical Guide for Students* as does the resources section at the end of this document.

**Reflect and adjust.** Be aware of a RWLE’s learning objectives: what are you supposed to be able to know or do afterwards? Actively assess during the experience whether or not this is happening. Adjust your approach or behavior when necessary. Stay solution-oriented both in terms of how you approach sustainability problems, and how you approach problems that arise within the experience with teamwork or comprehension. Ask questions. Communicate with your team and with your instructor.

**If you want to design your own RWLEs...** Many classes have opportunities for students to design their own assignment. This might be a semester long group project or an extra credit activity. If you want to turn it into a RWLE you will want to consider 1) What do you want to learn or get out of the assignment? 2) What kind of RWLE (refer to section two above) would help you achieve that “learning objective”, and 3) What kind of assignment outputs (papers, videos, presentations, maps, etc.) could you produce for you and your instructor to evaluate what you learned. Once you’ve thought a little about these three points you can approach your instructor with a tangible proposal and ask for help fleshing it out.

**Readings**


**Bibliography & Resources**


