Universität Basel

Publication

Teaching sustainable development and environmental ethics : the IBMB-concept of bringing theory and practical cases together

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University courses often have high academic standards but lack a reference to the 'real world'. Students do not get in contact with practical cases, a fact that needs to be changed, especially when it comes to environmental ethics. Sustainable development and environmental ethics as a university subject give educators the opportunity to sensitize future natural scientists to multi-faceted environmental problems. Teaching sustainable development and environmental ethics is therefore an interdisciplinary challenge that means bringing together philosophical ideas and concrete practical cases, at the local, regional, and global levels. It enables students to appreciate different points of view, to identify conflicts and to develop problem-solving strategies. This is best done with a combination of diverse teaching methods and access to the field of environmental problems. In our curriculum, we use team teaching methods with two members of our institute. We combine this with external expertise: for every session, an expert from a concrete field of application is invited (for example a geologist to talk about renewable resources or a biologist to inform about biodiversity). These experts introduce important sustainability issues to the students in a short talk, after which our teaching team prepares case examples that present problems related to the talk. These cases are then processed by students in small groups over a short time period. It is the students' job to identify ethical issues and to prepare first suggestions of possible solutions. Later, group results are presented to the entire class. After a plenary discussion, results are summarised by the teaching team, contextualised in terms of current scientific discussions, and commented on by the external expert. This teaching concept combines insights of 'real world' problems with interactions with experts, giving students an ethical-philosophical toolkit for their later work. To spread this concept is therefore very important.