Introduction

Contemporary education in the field of responsibility emphasises primarily intellectual issues and as such, is largely about responsibility. A more effective process has to include a broader range of reinforcing intelligences, including moral intuition, observation and emotion. The latter is particularly important for building a resilient commitment to responsible action and it is naive to believe that ethical action can be long maintained when it is felt to be futile or frustrating. In the real world, much irresponsibility stems from a feeling of powerlessness to effect positive change and/or believing that their individual actions can have no impact. Such irresponsibility is maintained when we fail to realise the positive fulfilment that commonly accompanies more humane and considerate living. In this case story from the University of Auckland, two exercises are described that work to bring these thoughts and emotions to the surface, where they can be consciously addressed. These exercises are drawn from a collection designed to inspire positive change and furthers the core ideals of PRME by exemplifying creative curriculum design and delivery for a more globally responsible and sustainable world. The first works directly with the self-imposed barriers that learners confront when they try to act more responsibly, and the second with the positivity that comes from engaged and effective altruism.

Challenges

When talking with young business students about the future they want to see, they unanimously describe a world that is much more responsibly managed and as a result, more sustainable, harmonious, inclusive, and thriving. Yet most also feel that, despite these aspirations, the reality of the near future will see declines on all of these dimensions. This is a depressing and deflating realisation, and education has critical role to play in empowering young people to see that positive change not only should be, but can be made. Doing this requires that the personal barriers each learner uses to deny enacting a greater personal responsibility be brought to the surface, and that the benefits of taking action are experienced.

Actions taken

The first objective is aided hugely by an exercise in which students deny themselves the everyday indulgences that actively undermine the ideal world and reflect upon the rationalisations that have resulted in abandoning responsible action. As students refrain from a whole range of ‘irresponsible’ purchases (generally successfully), potent dynamics are brought to the surface that reveal common patterns of debilitating resistance. When students work together to find shared themes that they commonly use in efforts to ‘get off the hook,’ the majority mention being strongly tested by feelings of futility (I can’t make a difference) and emotional distance (I can’t relate to the problem).

As these deflating feelings of powerlessness emerge, partner exercises can be used. This allows students to actually make a difference on the lives of distant others by having partners act together to effect positive change. In its latest iteration, this involved working with a New Zealand charity, the Fred Hollows Foundation (FHF), which performs life-changing cataract operations in poor countries for $25 per eye. A spokesperson from the Foundation visits the class to debate issues and answer questions, and
students are all given a ‘cataract mask’ that mimics what it is like to suffer from the ailment. Over the following week, they are challenged to ask four people they know for a $5 donation to the cause and adding $5 of their own, if they so choose.

Results

Students write reflectively on the experience (as they do for the preceding exercise), recounting in detail their own thoughts and feelings and the reactions of those they approached for $5. After a week, students bring the accumulated money to class, where it is counted and handed over to the appreciative Foundation. The atmosphere in the classroom as students combine their money is incredibly inspiring, and the total is usually far greater than expected, as students use broader social networks to go beyond the strict requirements of the exercise. A class of 65 people will easily raise several thousand dollars, and the positive sense of responsible empowerment is deeply moving for all concerned. When combined, these two exercises allow the creative instructor to expose the core rationalisations that we use to excuse ourselves from engaging more responsible action and allow a direct realisation of the emotional rewards of acting to change others’ lives for the better.

To manage successfully for a better world, future leaders must be challenged to understand both the intellectual and the personal dynamics of responsible living. Over many years of using these and other exercises central to educating for responsibility, hundreds of students have described their experience as deeply ‘transformative’ and literally ‘life-changing.’

The role of PRME/sustainability principles

This case study outlines a practical and inspiring classroom intervention that builds on a number of principles central to PRME’s stated purpose, in particular:

- Principle 1 - by developing the capabilities of students to work for an inclusive and sustainable global economy
- Principle 2 - by centrally incorporating values of global responsibility
- Principle 3 - by creating materials, processes and environments to enable effective and responsible learning experiences and
- Principle 6 - by facilitating and supporting dialogue with external organisations working for greater responsibility