Introduction

A pedagogical innovation, an entire course at the European business school, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, is taught outdoors, at a botanical garden. “Companies in Ecologies” is a master elective offered at the Business-Society Management department. This case story relates how a Professor has innovated at a Business School by creating an outdoor course that is entirely given at a botanical garden outside the university.

Challenges

Increasingly, questions are raised about management education and how business schools’ education could encourage responsible management. One criticism concerns the lack of business schools to help their students to connect to natural environment and ecological issues. From the literature we see that one of the wanted change is that students would be more connected to the natural environment.

In An interview with education for sustainable development ‘young voices’: beliefs and values from the next generation of ESD leaders, one of the voice explained that “there is a lot to be done in terms of linking knowledge to actions” (Shealy, 2009).

In the report ‘Educating for a sustainable future,’ a national environmental education statement for Australian schools (published by the Australian government’s Department of the Environment and Heritage, 2005), a clear distinction is made regarding education about the environment as well as in the environment: “Education about the environment focuses on students’ ‘understanding of important facts, concepts and theories, while education in the environment involves students in direct contact with a beach, forest, street or park to develop awareness and concern for the environment.”

Muir (1996), who took a close look at business schools, explains as well that placing the students into ‘real life’ environments helps them “to identify and challenge assumptions and values in the organisation, to highlight the context in which action and practices occur, and to explore alternatives to a given situation.”

Actions taken

The course was created in 2006 by Gail Whiteman, endowed professor of sustainability, management, and climate change.

When Whiteman was asked to create the course, she made a point of teaching it outdoors. To her, it had to be outdoors to help the students to connect to the natural environment that they were talking about. Whiteman describes the courses as experiential as well as linked to the business perspective. The students come to the garden twice a week over 3 months. They spend a few hours at the garden doing groups projects, reflecting on various topics, and sharing ideas and concerns. They also visit the Interface Company, a carpet manufacturer aiming at zero carbon emission by 2030, and share management challenges towards sustainable and responsible purposes.
Besides the meetings, readings are posted online, which students are required to reflect upon. They agree also required to create a field journal that is “reflective and personal in nature… reflects upon the literature, the classes, the news, and their own life experiences to document their evolving understanding of sustainability, including their intellectual and emotional breakthroughs as well as their frustrations. Within the field journal, they should also start developing their ‘ecosophy,’ that is a set of questions or concerns” (course outline 2007).

As Whiteman wants the students to use their “multi senses” and not only their brain, she asks them to be creative, to take risks, and to be supportive. It is a highly participatory class where people are required to engage and participate in different ways, according to the various profiles. The final exam is not an exam, as Whiteman explains with a big smile on her face, but an artistic project. Each student has to try artistically, emotionally to relate to the topics.

**Results**

The first immediate result is to help students to reconnect to their natural environment. As Whiteman witnesses every year, students have the pleasure coming here; some of them can be sceptical about the content or the use of the course at the beginning but they enjoy the place. During the first days of the MBA course given in 2012, we could hear students sharing with each other, “It reminds me of my childhood. I used to love nature and play in it all the time.”

The artistic project, called “photo essay,” brings various results; some students grow awareness about their natural surroundings, they start to slow down, to walk more outside, to appreciate the weather and the fauna and flora around them, even in the city. Some students start to calculate their carbon footprint and build a strategy to lower it by different actions: using less water, walking or cycling more, lowering the heater.

In 2008, 13 Master of Sciences’ students took the course and wrote a field journal. In the field journals it is possible to read how the natural environment has a positive impact on the participants. Each student witnesses positive self-change. And many of them compare its positive impact to a traditional course taught inside a building. Witnessing the environmental impact, a student explained that, “we all have had a moment of feeling completely connected, entangled and intertwined with nature. It’s this moment of feeling part of this web of life that could provide us the energy to change our ways of living. In other words, ‘there’s an ‘I’ in responsibility’ and we should become more aware of that.”

Regarding the impact of the class compared to a traditional one, another student mentioned after class 12, “this course has been very different from any other course I have taken before, but the impact has been so much bigger. I can’t recall one course that really made me think about myself and the course material as much as this course has. I believe this course did not only benefit my academic development, but it has also been a great personal experience, thank you.”

**The role of PRME/sustainability principles**

**Principle 1:** Throughout the course, students change their perception about business and the impact of businesses on the natural environment

**Principle 3:** Companies and ecology course incorporates the values of global social responsibility as portrayed in international initiatives, such as the United Nations Global Compact.
Principle 5: The course is open to various guest speakers and the students do visit companies and get the opportunity of interacting with managers of business corporations to explore effective approaches to meeting challenges about sustainable and responsible management.