

SUSTAINABILITY IN MEDIA EDUCATION: COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL EMPOWERMENT BY THE SUMED PROJECT

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Abstract

Sustainability has become a very important aspect both in education and in industry. The United Nations' Agenda 2030 has 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that need to be implemented. An EU co-funded project called SUMED, linking together five institutions from four countries, is working with University level media contents, as well as with the media industry, both to analyse the situation regarding the integration of sustainability goals within the curricula of the first and the working model of the second, and creating new or redesigned curricula that implement SDGs in media courses, leading to a more skilled and richer knowledge base for students that can then be transferred to industry. This paper looks at sustainability at University level and at the place of work and also reports on four different approaches taken by SUMED partners in order to fulfill the aims of the project.

Introduction

Despite the dynamic nature of media formats, tools, and methods, professionals in the field often overlook sustainability. Professionals include teachers of media in the higher institutions, as well as media practitioners working in the industry.

The EU co-funded project SUMED (*Sustainable Multidimensional Media Contents*) was initiated by institutions in four countries, with the intention of recognizing the pressing societal and environmental calls for sustainability, alongside concerns for health and well-being in the workplace. The aim of the partner institutions is to transform media education to encourage a more structured inclusion of the professional uncertainty for sustainability dimension in the training of education professionals.

The SUMED project partners are INNOCAMP.PL and the University of Gdańsk, both from Poland, the Universidad Politècnica de València in Spain, the Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland, and the University of Malta in Malta.

The paper argues that sustainability must permeate the entire media supply chain, emphasizing the need to integrate sustainability criteria into the education of future media professionals.

Each SUMED partner has conducted training sessions for media teachers who designed or redesigned their courses and curricula for students to accommodate evolving needs. The development of re-structured curricula and courses is envisioned to not only benefit local communities and organizations but also to empower new employees with relevant skills.

Sustainability in Media: A Review of the Literature

“Sustainability can be broadly understood as the ongoing viability of the complex interconnection between the environment and human activity. Sustainability is fundamentally concerned with the nurturing of the health and productive capacity of the environment and all its constituent elements—land and soil, water, air, biodiversity, vegetation, and animal welfare.” (Craig, 2019, p.3)

Attempting to solve major unsustainable problems, the United Nations prepared its Agenda 2030, which has 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). It was always intended that higher education institutions be among the first to implement these goals, helping to ascertain the practical usage and awareness of these goals, and most of these institutions worldwide took on the task in an official way. On the global stage, the Johannesburg Earth Summit of 2002 endorsed the proposal that sustainable development must be an integral component of all levels of education: “Sustainability appears to be our best hope for solving an ecological crisis that resulted from the material processes, outcomes, and mindset associated with modern technology.” (Bendor, 2018, pp. 1-2)

Indications on progress show that “major progress has been made in actions related to the environmental management of their campuses, or the creation of green structures. However, a sustainable university must be committed to sustainability in more than campus greening programs and must include proper education and training, involve new ways of doing research, and promote an authentic engagement with the community” (Collazo Expósito & Grandos Sánchez, 2020).

This echoes what was written by Albareda-Tiana, et al., (2018), when they said that with regards to the implementation of the SDGs “Transformation is a complex and long-term ambition. It must start by recognizing the SD agenda calls for a paradigm shift in education. It is not only a matter of transforming institutional responsibility but also curriculum reorientation and teaching to better serve the needs of current and future generations.” (p. 474).

The need for sustainability training has been recognized for some time. But it is extremely difficult to implement, primarily because of the lack of know-how in its regard. “Currently, industry, community and university groups have limited knowledge of how tertiary educators understand and use the ideas of sustainability within their teaching programs” (Reid & Petocz, 2006). In fact, Reid and Petocz found that the majority of the participants of their research saw sustainability and teaching as separate entities. The authors had expected a higher degree of awareness of issues of sustainability and a greater integration into teaching programmes. Indeed “for many scholars, effective implementation of sustainability commitments implies the integration of sustainability across the curriculum” (Green, 2013, p. 135).

A multi-country study, aimed at identifying the level of importance given to competences on sustainable development by teaching staff at a number of higher education institutions, found that there were “competences needed for teaching about sustainable development that center around learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together in relation to knowledge of sustainability problems, interdisciplinary and analytical thinking, developing solutions, and recognizing diverse values.” (Leal Filho, et al., 2021, pp. 110-111). An overall suggestion coming from this study, which took place in 40 countries, was that sustainability teaching competence building could be made stronger if prominently placed as one of the learning objectives in graduate courses and degree programmes.

A study that compares the strategic implementation of sustainability practices in four English and four Australian universities (Ralph & Stubbs, 2014), found that what is needed is “clear leadership in a number of areas: prioritising interdisciplinary collaboration; providing resources to undertake the work required; and providing the university community with the necessary information, skills and knowledge. The importance of engaging, informing and resourcing university staff of the university is critical to the success of integrating environmental sustainability into all areas” (p.87).

In fact, this across-the-board method seems to be the favoured one by all researchers in this area. “To strengthen education as a substantive function, curricula must be updated and integrated into the context of education for sustainability in its environmental, social and economic dimensions. Thus, one of the main challenges for the university is to rethink the curriculum, which in this process requires the participation of managers, teachers, students and the entire university community.” (Brito et al., 2018, p. 14)

The difficulties are real. A content analysis of over a thousand bachelor and masters degree programmes and their related curricula in 28 European countries showed

that the level of curricular integration of sustainability aspects in the field of media and communication is low (14%) to very low (6%) on module level (Karmasin & Voci, 2021). The authors admit that the journey in this direction will be a long one.

Beyond the university, and potentially utilising a workforce trained in sustainability by Universities, industry too needs to integrate sustainability-related initiatives. Social media is often used as vehicles of communication between industry and its stakeholders. However, “sustainability-related communication by large corporations and its impact on consumers remains an understudied area” (Jha & Verma, 2023, p. 723). Hence the SUMED project’s emphasis on this aspect, also taking on board Corporate Social Responsibility as a way of ascertaining the sustainability of practice (Weder et al., 2023).

Very little research, for example, exists on how the audio-visual sector can be sustainable, environmentally, socio-culturally and economically. *Green Shooting* has become a term that describes sustainability in all the different stages of audio-visual production (Lopera-Mármol & Jiménez-Morales, 2021). Again, here, universities need to play a role, preparing for an industry that needs the expertise to incorporate sustainability practices: “there is a lack of academic involvement, if the audio-visual sector and academia amalgamation could lead to more cohesive industry development in sustainability standards” (p.12).

The examples from research taken on by SUMED partners follow on from the literature above.

Research Carried out by SUMED Partners

A number of the partners in the SUMED project have been running research and experimental work in order to determine the extent and feasibility of sustainable goals being met by media teachers, media students and the media industry. Below are four examples of this work, which has led to a better understanding of the collaborative strategies needed or in place for a sustainability curriculum². All are based on papers published in two booklets by the SUMED project.

Industry Interviews

Halonen et al. (2024) report on three person-to-person structured interviews were conducted with employees of three Finnish companies operating in different sectors of media: namely, the Finnish Public Service media company, Yle, a private marketing company, and a private film production company. The main topics of

² Based on EMAS https://green-business.ec.europa.eu/eco-management-and-audit-scheme-emas_en

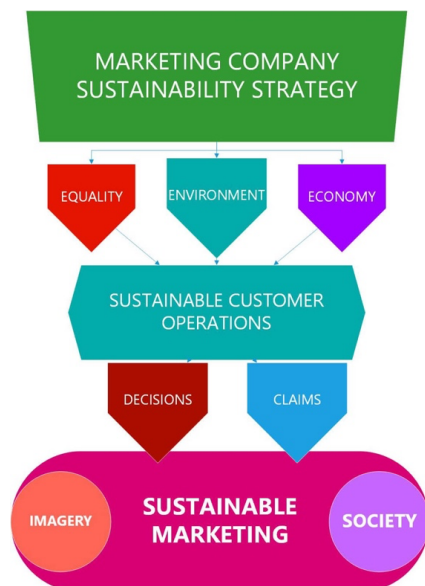
the interviews were sustainability and responsibility issues. An analysis was also made of the companies' own regulations and guidelines considering sustainability. Asking about how sustainable was the day to day work in each of the companies, it was clear that the terms by which sustainability could be practiced were not too clear. The interviewee in Yle, for example, admitted that the actual terms are not being talked about. However, that did not mean that sustainability was not part of the structure. He said that, in fact, it was already well organised. The training offered by Yle ascertained that journalistic guidelines and Yle's own guidelines, rules, and values were adhered to.

This was mirrored by what the employee of the private film production company said. The interviewee insisted that sustainability issues have been under scrutiny in the company for circa five years, with the company continually seeking material with sustainable relevance for its storylines, and with a sustainability strategy actively engaged. The Me-Too movement had triggered a need for social responsibility, with open discussion about everything related to its ramifications.

The interviewee of the marketing company was found to be passionate about sustainability and responsibility, making particular efforts to incorporate these values into everyday work. This referred particularly to environmental responsibility, social responsibility, and economic responsibility, dealing with equality, the environment, and the economy (Figure 1). The context is the sustainability strategy of the individual company and then the forces at play are depicted to lead to sustainable marketing

Figure 1

Visual Representation of Sustainable Values in Marketing Decision Making
(Graphic by: Pentti Halonen)

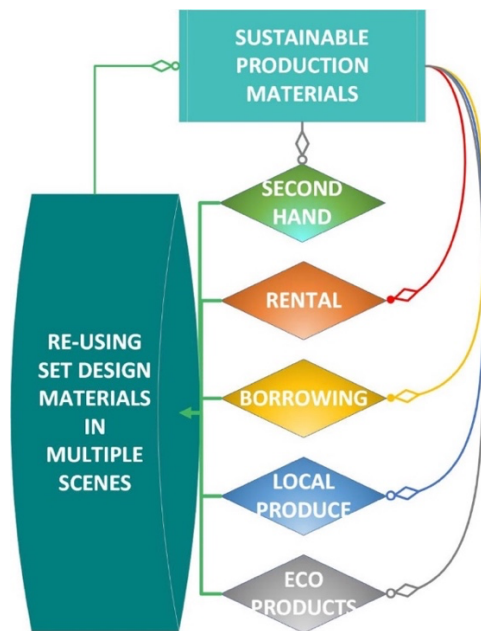


These responsibilities translate into practical terms: for example, when new campaign products are being designed: in the choosing of printing inks and in the design of new packaging. The less colour needed, the more environment-friendly the packaging is. Environmental issues are also being addressed by choosing trains for travel to meetings and opting for snacks during coffee breaks from local companies – the company’s aim is to prefer the local businesses.

Renewability of materials is also at the forefront of considerations (Figure 2). The employees themselves have been given the opportunity to take part in writing the guidelines on responsibility.

Figure 2

A Visual Representation of How Production Materials Can Be Sustainable in the Media Industry. (Different ways of doing this are presented; Graphic by: Pentti Halonen)



Though the interviews are in no way representative, they are indicative of the fact that steps towards a more sustainable media work can be and are already being taken by the industry, not only by the employees themselves, but by the company’s directors who “ensure that every employee is not only aware of the principles but also takes them into account in daily work.” (Halonen, Kuusela & Järvi­petäjä (2024), p. 52.

Green Screenwriting

Maslowska (2024) reports on the outcomes of three undergraduate screenwriting projects from the University of Malta. The students created screenwriting portfolios

under the overarching theme of “Green Filmmaking: Screenwriting for Today’s Climate.” The primary focus was on how sustainability principles were incorporated into these creative projects. This was followed by an analysis of the students' decision-making processes and an assessment of how sustainability concepts were integrated into their screenplays.

The project brief for the 2020-2023 cohort focused on "planet placement", encouraging students to write screenplays that promoted sustainable behaviours. The brief emphasized the use of local settings, minimizing resource consumption, and fostering a mindset where sustainability becomes an integral part of the creative process rather than an afterthought. In other words, the challenge was to create environmentally friendly screenplays where sustainable practices were an integral part of the story itself, without explicitly focusing on ecological issues.

Out of 25 projects, three screenplays were randomly selected. Each screenplay was assessed in terms of the students’ approach to the theme, narrative elements, genre classification, storyline development, impact on sustainability, and how these elements contributed to the overall effectiveness and message of the work.

As hoped, it was evident that sustainable principles were deeply ingrained within their approach to screenwriting.

Student A:

Approach: Opted for a singular primary setting, an apartment complex, to minimize resource usage and production expenses.

Narrative Elements: Integrated sustainable practices such as bicycling, recycling, and reusable water bottles into the “coming-of-age” storyline.

Genre Classification: Coming-of-age

Storyline Development: Followed a protagonist navigating daily challenges, subtly revealing sustainable behaviours as part of their routine.

Impact: Illustrated how individual actions, even in mundane situations, contribute to a broader environmental initiative, fostering relatability and achievable sustainability goals.

Student B:

Approach: Chose a singular primary setting, Malta, to highlight environmental challenges and minimize production costs.

Narrative Elements: Seamlessly intertwined environmental activism with personal anecdotes, addressing wider socio-environmental concerns.

Genre Classification: Dramedy

Storyline Development: Centred around a character inspired by real-life events, aiming to engage viewers with familiar settings and pertinent environmental issues.

Impact: Emphasized the significance of community engagement and individual accountability in tackling environmental challenges, advocating for collective action.

Student C:

Approach: Positioned the narrative in an unspecified future, exploring the aftermath of an environmental catastrophe to convey a sense of urgency.

Narrative Elements: Featured two child protagonists to underscore innocence and vulnerability amidst ecological crises.

Genre Classification: Sci-fi

Storyline Development: Illustrated the resilience and adaptability of children amidst environmental adversity, conveying a message of hope and urgency.

Impact: Aimed to resonate with audiences by evoking empathy for future generations and prompting immediate action to address pressing environmental concerns.

The screenplays suggest that the students understood eco-screenwriting tropes implementing critical and creative application of sustainability principles into screenwriting. The diverse methods employed by the students reveal a blend of personal experiences and research, resulting in narratives that not only entertain but also raise awareness about critical environmental issues. Moreover, the emphasis on sustainability in these screenwriting projects reflected a broader trend in the media industry, where environmental responsibility is becoming increasingly important. By cherishing these values in our students, the aim is to support their development as environmentally conscious storytellers who can inspire positive change through their narratives and contribute to a more sustainable future in the media landscape and beyond.

Sustainable Journalism Education

Anikowski and Jagiełło Rusiłowski (2024) propose an educational metaphor they call “the Beehive” (Figure 3), exploring its historical roots and contemporary application in adopting sustainable learning systems within communities of practice. Originating from practices at Oxford University in the 1940s, influenced by Professor Rege Revans’ approach to Action and Inquiry-based Learning, the

Beehive concept emphasizes collaborative problem-solving and collective intelligence (Revans, 1982).

Drawing from Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), it highlights the importance of providing students with mediating tools to facilitate communication and understanding within both individual and collective contexts.

Figure 3

A Visual Representation of the Beehive Model for Sustainable Learning Systems, including All the Elements Needed for Sustainability. (Graphic by: Oliwia Woźnicka)



The report suggests that the Beehive approach offers a unique framework for diffusing innovation and managing tensions related to change. By promoting a sense of belonging and empathy, it aims to disarm resistance and create conducive environments for learning and change-making. This approach reflects Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), emphasizing the importance of scaffolded learning experiences within supportive environments. Furthermore, the report explores the metaphorical implications of the Beehive in educational and design contexts, emphasizing the value of cognitive, social, and cultural exchanges in generating sustainable solutions. It underscores the importance of cross-pollination of expertise and talents in fostering creativity and effective communication.

Anikowski and Jagiello Rusiłowski (2024) also discuss participatory communication methods as integral to improving communication within the beehive framework. Drawing from anthropology and social psychology, as well as

active listening techniques, these methods aim to foster trust, conscious participation, mutual respect, and engagement within diverse communities.

Active listening involves being active, open to dialogue, and questioning one's certainties.

Sclavi (2014) formulated seven rules for active listening:

1. Take time to conclude.
2. Change perspective to see different viewpoints.
3. Assume others are right and seek to understand how and why.
4. Emotions convey information about how one sees, rather than what is seen.
5. A good listener explores various perspectives.
6. Embrace paradoxes and disagreements as opportunities for creative conflict management.
7. Humour can be a tool for mastering the art of listening.

Highlighting a practical application of the Beehive concept, Anikowski's and Rusilowski's (2024) report describes the "Media for Climate" event organized by INNOCAMP.PL in December 2023. Bringing together media professionals, educators, activists, and government officials, the event aimed to explore sustainable communication approaches in journalism education. Through trust-building activities, screenings, and discussions, participants exchanged insights and experiences, emphasizing the importance of positive, solution-oriented communication in addressing environmental challenges.

Anikowski and Jagiello-Rusiłowski (2024) conclude with recommendations for sustainable journalism education, emphasizing the need for institutional change, positive communication practices, and innovative teaching methods. The conclusion highlights the importance of engaging diverse perspectives and fostering critical thinking skills among future journalists to communicate sustainability issues effectively. The participants' recommendations were as follows:

- Sustainable journalism education cannot happen without institutional change in higher education. Academia needs to be oriented towards sustainability issues and methods that allow for more flexibility and multidirectional communication. Providing good examples is the best way to gradually influence institutional change.
- Journalists should be trained to use positive, solution-oriented communication, which empowers those receiving media content, engages them in social initiatives, and prevents news avoidance.
- Young journalism students can be reached more easily and effectively through digital channels. Not only are they there every day, but it is much

less stressful for them, because they are not stigmatized, so this is an appropriate way to engage them in sustainability.

- Tools and methods for training future journalists should take the form of fact-checking tools, methods to expose greenwashing, and any additional ways to strengthen critical thinking. Young journalists should also meet with people from different backgrounds: science, media, and culture, to get their perspectives and knowledge, leaving comfort zones, but trying to reach people from other communities to build sustainability, which is fruitful for their future work and for understanding the complex nature of sustainability. (Anikowski & Jagiello-Rusiłowski, 2024, p.65)

Raising Sustainability Awareness through Communication

The Universitat Politècnica de València implemented a number of research activities with teachers, seeking to understand the important role that communication plays in addressing the challenges facing the planet. In his report on these activities, Julio González Liendo (2024), refers to a survey carried out by Professor Nuria Lloret Romero from the same university, with 50 communication teachers at three campuses of the University.

Quoting directly from the report:

- the teachers attest that communication plays a pivotal role in sustainability by fostering organisational transparency (38%), aiding understanding of the planet's evolving reality (38%) and emphasising the significance of sustainability training for communication teachers helps with understanding the importance of media in societal transformation (16%).
- When asked to evaluate the importance of sustainability training for communication teachers, 18% rated it as the highest priority, 9% assigned it a score 9 out of 10, 27% ranked it in the eighth place, 9% rated it as a 7, and 18% rated it as a 6.
- When asked, "To what extent can sustainability training for communication teachers help them understand it?" 27% believe that it facilitates comprehension of various educational dynamics for transferring sustainability concepts and their professional implications to communication students. Another 27% argue that it assists in defining specific sustainability content and methods for its integration into subjects and communication. Additionally, 18% think that such training aids in understanding the diverse dimensions of sustainability.
- The teachers who participated in the survey revealed that undergoing training through courses and workshops on sustainability greatly enhanced their teaching abilities, enabling them to incorporate effectively this content into their study units (45%). Additionally, 18% acknowledged that such

training would deepen their understanding of the true scope of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while 9% emphasized its role in elucidating the significance of communication within sustainability processes. Furthermore, it was noted by 9% of respondents that such training assists in addressing didactic shortcomings, facilitating knowledge transfer, and fostering a shift in perception regarding sustainability and its ramifications. (González Liendo, 2024, p. 53)

It was suggested by other research carried out by the university that promoting messages and practices that drive positive change towards sustainability, establishing strategies to reduce climate anxiety, fostering Earth coalitions, countering long-term stress, and seeking meaning at work would be fruitful. The importance of promoting critical thinking and fact-checking as essential tools for journalism students, reflecting the research of Anikowski and Jagiello Rusiowski, was also emphasised by the participants of the research.

There is definitely a need for a continuous discussion about the challenges faced by communication professionals in implementing sustainable practices in a digitalized world.

Conclusion

The multi-pronged approach taken on by the SUMED partners in research on sustainability practices is intended to both understand what practices are actually already in place, and also how new models of curriculum development can help add to those practices, both at teaching and learning levels, as well as at an industry level.

This can be clearly seen in the reinvention of screenwriting to go the green way in the Masłowska (2024) experiment, as well as in Anikowski and Jagiello-Rusiowski's 2024 Beehive model, infusing teaching with much needed sustainable practices, particularly in the light of the negatives indicated in the Gonzalez Liendo (2024) report regarding perception of sustainability goals by academics.

The successful transitioning from school desk to industry in the audio-visual sector, as reported by Halonen et al., is therefore a breath of fresh air, and a clear indication how curricular redesigning to embrace sustainability practices can leave a clear and fruitful result.

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