

Course Content (Degrees)

HIGHLY COMMENDED

The University of Gloucestershire Speaks the Language of Sustainability

Dr. Arran Stibbe believes that “language is crucial in achieving sustainable development. The words that we use, and the concepts they embody, shape our thinking and that of other people. For example, representing animals and plants in very mechanistic ways - such as ‘stock’ or ‘raw material’ - suggest they have no intrinsic value beyond the economic and so helps to legitimate environmentally damaging intensive farming.”

This concern is now communicated to students on the new Language and Ecology first year module which Arran Stibbe co-ordinates from the University’s Humanities Department. The 31 students in the 2006 intake were mainly taking English Language degrees, but others came from Biology and Geography.

The module was developed over two years, with internal staff inputs supplemented with external ones from members of the Language & Ecology Research Forum, and staff at the Centre for Human Ecology, Edinburgh. It examines how issues related to sustainable development are represented in the mass media, and in specialised areas such as agriculture and economics.



Laura Heeps, Rebecca Pailing and Gregory Thacker at work on a Language and Ecology project

Student feedback - captured in learning logs and questionnaires - has been very positive (e.g. “it was really, really fun, interesting and insightful”). The comments made also indicate an enhanced critical awareness (“I read newspapers differently now”), a more holistic view of the topic and its relationships to others (“I do think about how my courses relate to each other whereas before I didn’t think they had any relation”) and a greater interest in changing personal lifestyle (“made me think more about the environment and what I can do to help.”)

One of the unique features of the module is that students contributed comments and articles to the international Language & Ecology Research Forum, with some students going on to publish in an online journal, write a book chapter, and receive offers of funding to attend conferences.

Other non-environmental benefits of the course include the development of communication and team-working skills amongst students, and valuable experience in developing interdisciplinary links.

Arran Stibbe believes that “courses on language and ecology have the potential to integrate seamlessly into many subject areas, because they analyse something common to all students - language - and relate it to environmental issues. For example, language awareness can help science students present their work in ways which not only provide information but also persuade readers to care deeply about sustainability issues. This is important because formal, scientific, and technical styles of language, on their own, have been found insufficient to inspire the fundamental shift in values necessary for people to work towards a sustainable society.”

Judges’ Comments on Course Content - Degree (continued)

The University of Gloucestershire’s first year module on Language and Ecology is impressive in demonstrating that sustainability can be integrated into even the most unlikely academic homes. It demonstrates that humanities subjects have significant potential to unlock some of the deeper causes of environmental destruction, and to help develop new forms of sustainability skills. The University’s commitment to making the lessons available to the sector is also commendable.