

Título:

Challenges and opportunities in combing the competences of universities and NGOs to create proposals for teaching sustainability

Autor:

Anke Uhlenwinkel, lecturer at the University of Potsdam. Before doing her PhD and habilitation at the University of Bremen she has worked as a teacher at a comprehensive school in Dormagen (between Cologne and Düsseldorf). Her main fields of investigation are teaching strategies, differentiation, argumentation skills, transformation of knowledge structures, geographical concepts and approaches in geography education in different European countries. She has been partner in a Comenius project on European Values Education (EVE). In the Berlin-Potsdam region she has collaborated with local NGOs to promote ESD in geography education. She has been invited speaker at the Anne Frank Model United Nations.

Contacto:

Universität Potsdam, Institut für Geographie, Karl-Liebknecht-Str. 24-25, 14476 Potsdam, Germany; e-mail: uhlenw@uni-potsdam.de

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Abstract

Although Education for Sustainable Development is often well promoted in Germany it seems to play a marginal role in the school curricula. At the same time NGOs engaged in issues of sustainability do not necessarily make education an important part of their work. This led to the idea of joining forces and developing teaching material in collaboration with a teacher training course and NGOs in the federal states of Brandenburg and Berlin. This article discusses the inherent differences of the two partners' perspectives as a background for the project and shows how this influenced the works produced by the student teachers who took part in the course. It is hoped that these reflections will be helpful for planning future collaborations.

1. Introduction

In December 2002 the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development. The lead agency responsible for the coordination of

the project is the UNESCO and its aim is to foster the integration of “the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning” (UNESCO 2005, 6). The decade started in 2005, which means that well over half of it has now passed.

In Germany curriculum makers, schools and NGOs have reacted to the proclamation of the decade and made some efforts to integrate education for sustainable development into their agendas. As Germany does not have one national curriculum but (almost) sixteen different curricula, (almost) one in each federal state, I will here confine my argument to the federal states of Brandenburg and Berlin, as they have practically identical curricula and the following example is set in these two federal states.

Regardless of the subject in question, all curricula for year 7 to 10 in Brandenburg are preceded by four pages of general statements about education and its aims. This chapter includes a paragraph on sustainable behaviour that requires teachers to educate students in a way that they will develop a lifestyle in accordance with their responsibility for future generations. This, according to the curriculum, entails that students are able to analyse and evaluate developments that are not sustainable. To reach this aim they should learn about environmental, economic and social issues with special reference to transport and mobility (MBS 2008). Apart from that only the subject of geography makes sustainability a topic in its own right. It is headed “Global futures and ways to implement sustainability locally and globally” and covers aspects such as climate change, increasing scarcity of resources and environmental protection. The topic is one of ten themes that are covered during the four year period and is taught in year 10. It was included in the curriculum as the subject of geography feels a special obligation to promote the preservation of the earth through sustainable development.

NGOs in Brandenburg have also taken up the challenge. Since 2004 they have been organising a two week event called BREBIT (Brandenburger Entwicklungspolitische Bildungs- and Informationstage) in November each year. It offers special workshops, projects and debates to be held at schools all over the federal state. Since 2007 the themes for each year have been chosen in accordance with yearly themes promoted by the national committee for the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development. These themes were cultural diversity (2007), water (2008), energy (2009), money (2010) and cities (2011). The theme for 2012 is nutrition and the theme for 2013 will be mobility. Notwithstanding the huge effort that has been invested in these activities NGOs are often small and have only limited personal and financial resources. Also those that are not focussed on education itself are often project-centred and only use a fraction of their financial budget for campaigning or educational purposes – in concrete figures this means that just one percent of the total resources are used for campaigning and only a half percent of the funding received from the Department of Economic Cooperation and Development is spent on education (Reuter 2008).

This situation implies that despite the efforts undertaken by the different groups and organisations education for sustainable development still finds itself in a rather marginal position in both fields. In formal education there is a marked gap concerning the introduction of the issues and topics of sustainable development and in the context of the NGOs the focus is more on sustainable development itself with education being at best a means to an end. The idea for

the project described here was to encourage cooperation between the two fields with the aim of learning and profiting from each other. This was to be achieved by devoting a course in geography education to the theme of education for sustainable development and asking the students to prepare teaching materials in cooperation with selected NGOs. Before I will refer to the organisation and outcomes of the project I would like to discuss the opportunities and challenges of such cooperation with reference to Marsden's model of curriculum planning (Marsden, 1997).

2. Differences and similarities in the perspectives of the formal education system and NGOs

Marsden used his model of curriculum planning to discuss the role of subject content in the geography classroom. The model is extremely simple which makes it a useful instrument for comparing the perspectives of formal education and NGOs when it comes to education for sustainable development. Marsden claims that there are three basic components of curriculum making: the subject content, the pedagogical process and the social purposes followed (fig. 1). The subject content is not so much defined by the amount of facts transmitted but by "the state of the art conceptual frameworks of the subject" (Marsden 1997, 242). Therefore the subject content has to relate back to the academic discipline and try to transform the theories developed there in a way that makes them accessible for students and the wider public at large. The pedagogical process is concerned with the needs of the students and their understandings as well as with teaching strategies that enable the students' learning and the promotion of skills such as analysing or discussing problems. This component relates mainly, but not exclusively to the general education courses offered at universities. The social purposes are described as the "good causes" (ibid.) that people follow at a certain time in a certain society. For geography teachers this has often been a concern with the protection of the environment or with global issues such as hunger and poverty. According to Marsden a good curriculum has to succeed in keeping these three components in a reasonable balance.

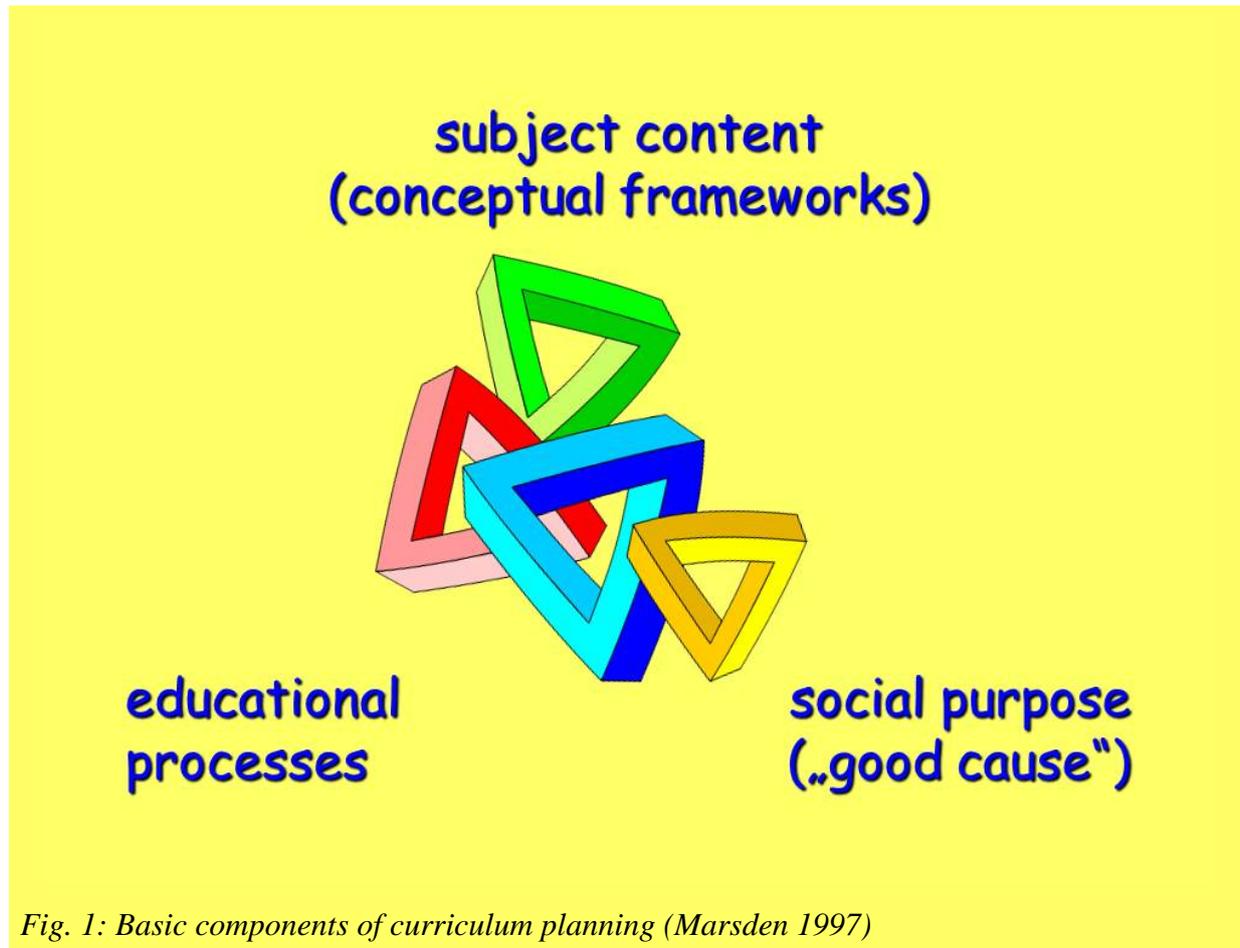


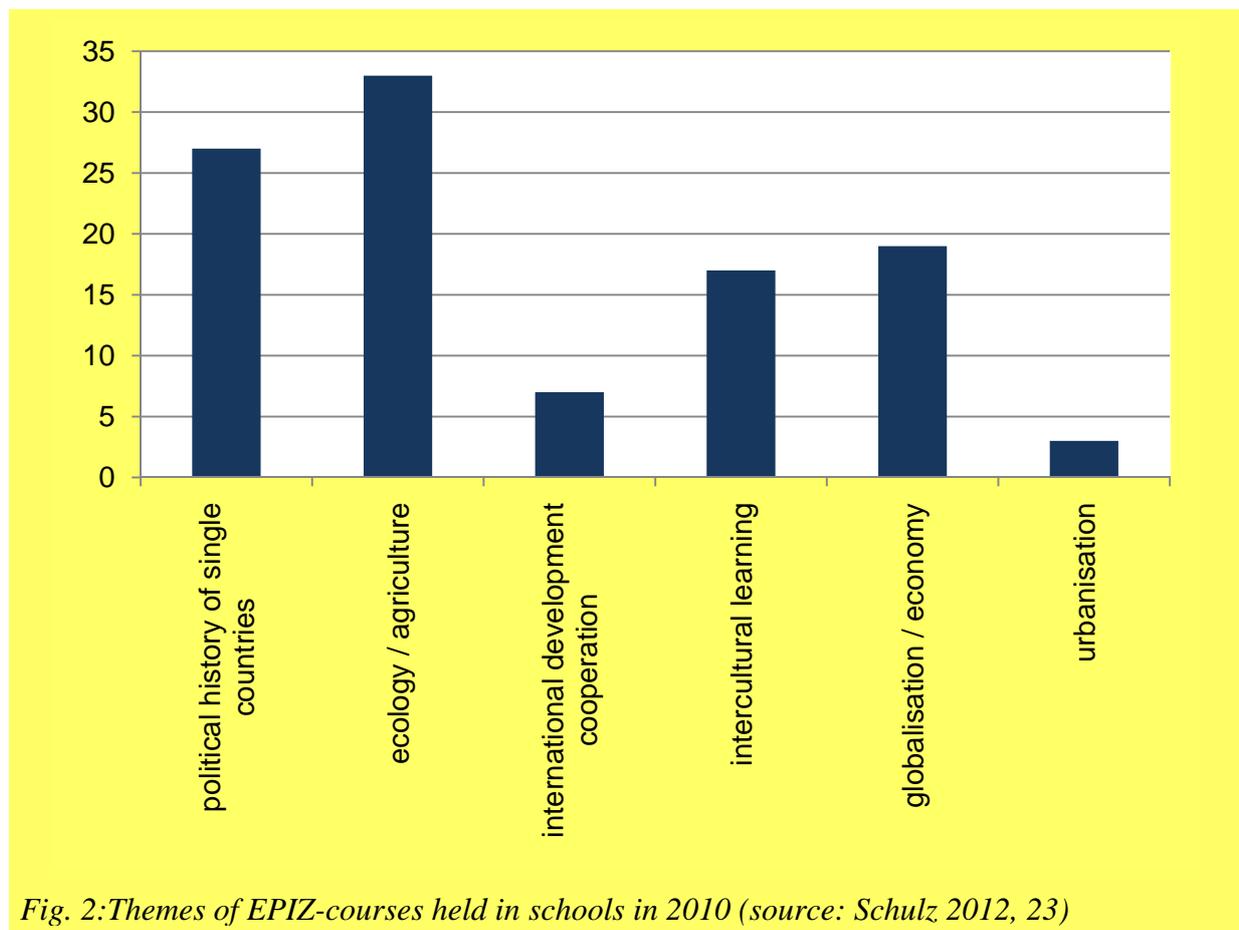
Fig. 1: Basic components of curriculum planning (Marsden 1997)

Before I compare the perspectives of the formal educational system and NGOs with reference to these three basic components it is necessary to define what is meant by NGO in this context. The term NGO implies that it relates to organisations that are non-governmental, but it usually also means non-profit organisations (Reuter 2008). This still leaves us with a great number of quite different organisations like trade unions, business associations, churches and private citizen groups. Therefore NGOs are further defined as following a course that does not only benefit their members, but also for example people in other countries or future generations and as being led by a certain set of shared values (ibid.). This would include giants like Greenpeace and small local groups that may run a fair trade shop or organise help for HIV-patients in a specific country.

Comparing NGOs and the formal educational system with respect to the subject content one marked difference is evident. While the formal educational system is organised by subjects that are each more or less related to an academic discipline, NGOs often focus on a specific topic like the protection of the great bustard, the building of sand dams or the integration of asylum seekers. These different perspectives entail different kinds of expert knowledge. The geography teacher for example may be able to enhance the understanding of an issue by using geographical concepts such as place, space, scale, interaction, diversity, perception and representation as well as change (Taylor 2008, Uhlenwinkel forthcoming a and b). In contrast, the NGO activist may have experience in relation to the implementation of specific measures in specific countries and a broader and deeper knowledge of specific issues as he does not re-

strict his interest to a school subject (Reuter 2008). This constellation may lead to an extremely fruitful discussion, but may also make cooperation difficult, depending on the openness of the people involved (Gathercole, Prinzler forthcoming).

An evaluation of the courses of one of the NGOs involved in the project shows a slightly different picture, but the same problem: the difference is due to the fact that the geography curricula in Brandenburg are extremely traditional focussing on regional geography (Uhlenwinkel, forthcoming c). This implies that teachers have to teach continents and countries starting with Asia, then going on to Africa, followed by the Americas and finally leading to Australia (MBS, 2008). Thus, geographical concepts are not mentioned at all and consequently they are not taught (Schulz, 2011). The problem remains the same as country knowledge does not necessarily imply themes important in the field of education for sustainable development. This gap is obvious when looking at the themes of the courses that teachers chose. Topics like (organic) agriculture and country specific questions that fit well into the geography curricula of the federal states of Brandenburg and Berlin were highly demanded, while issues that may be more characteristic for sustainable development as globalisation, intercultural learning or international development cooperation were less prominent among the courses held (Schulz 2012; see fig. 2). It therefore seems to be important to try and bridge the gap between either of the possible schools' perspectives on issues of sustainability and the NGOs' understanding of relevant topics.



With respect to the pedagogical processes teachers and teacher training institutions are obviously the professionals as long as cognitive learning is concerned. They reflect on competences to be obtained and on strategies that may help students obtaining them. In so far, they may be of great help for NGOs when they decide to use their expert knowledge to develop strategies especially tailored to the needs of an education for sustainable development. A good example for this approach is the way Tide~'s Development Compass Rose was created (Tide~ 2003). Many German NGOs that are not specifically concerned with education unfortunately reject the idea of cognitive learning and stress emotional learning instead. They try to involve children and young people by making them weave baskets, plant tomatoes, care for animals or experience a wood blindfolded. This approach very often leads to a feel good factor that may be welcomed by some teachers especially at the end of the term, but may not necessarily lead to sustainable learning outcomes. Although there is an obvious ideological gap here, this may be overcome by creative minds that succeed in turning cognitive content into meaningful action (Joppich 2010).

The research cited above (Schulz 2012) clearly shows that the gap between the teachers' professional knowledge of pedagogical processes and the teaching strategies employed by the NGOs is strongly felt by the educators. Although their overall feedback is by far more positive than negative it is noteworthy that teaching strategies rank rather low in the positive feedback (fig. 3), while the lack of activating teaching strategies ranks highest in the negative feedback (fig. 4).

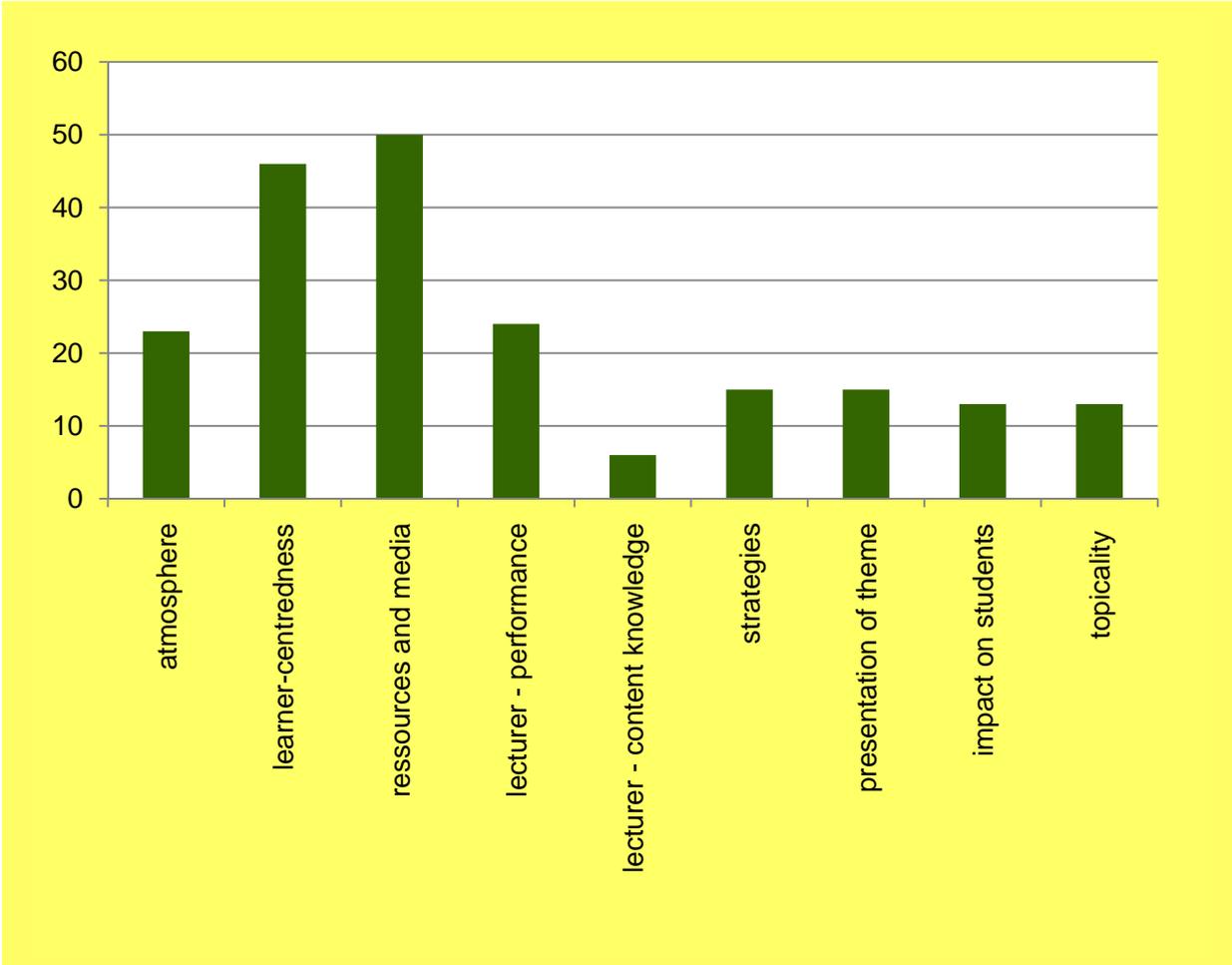


Fig. 3: Positive feedback to EPIZ-courses in 2010 (source: Schulz 2012, 39)

Similar differences can be observed in relation to the social purposes. NGOs that focus on a certain issue or project do of course have social purposes. They also need to be deeply involved in processes of agenda setting, risk avoidance and the maintenance of strategic alliances (Reuter 2008). These strategic alliances may include cooperation with schools as it allows the NGOs to promote their issues. Teachers on the other hand are obliged to be politically neutral in their lessons. This obligation has been codified in the Beutelsbach Consensus in 1976. It formulates three principles a teacher has to observe when teaching political issues: (1) he is prohibited to overpower a student and force him to take over the teachers view, (2) issues that are discussed controversially in society have to be discussed controversially in lessons and (3) the student must be given the chance to develop his own understanding of the issues and voice his own opinion (see: www.lpb-bw.de). Clearly, this obligation has a great potential for hindering teachers to cooperate with NGOs that are focused on promoting their issues. On the other hand NGOs can use their image as being reliant and trustworthy (Reuter 2008) as a counter argument, especially as education for sustainable development is also promoted by the curricula which leads to teachers finding themselves in a double-bind situation. Still this issue has to be considered when trying to start joint projects.

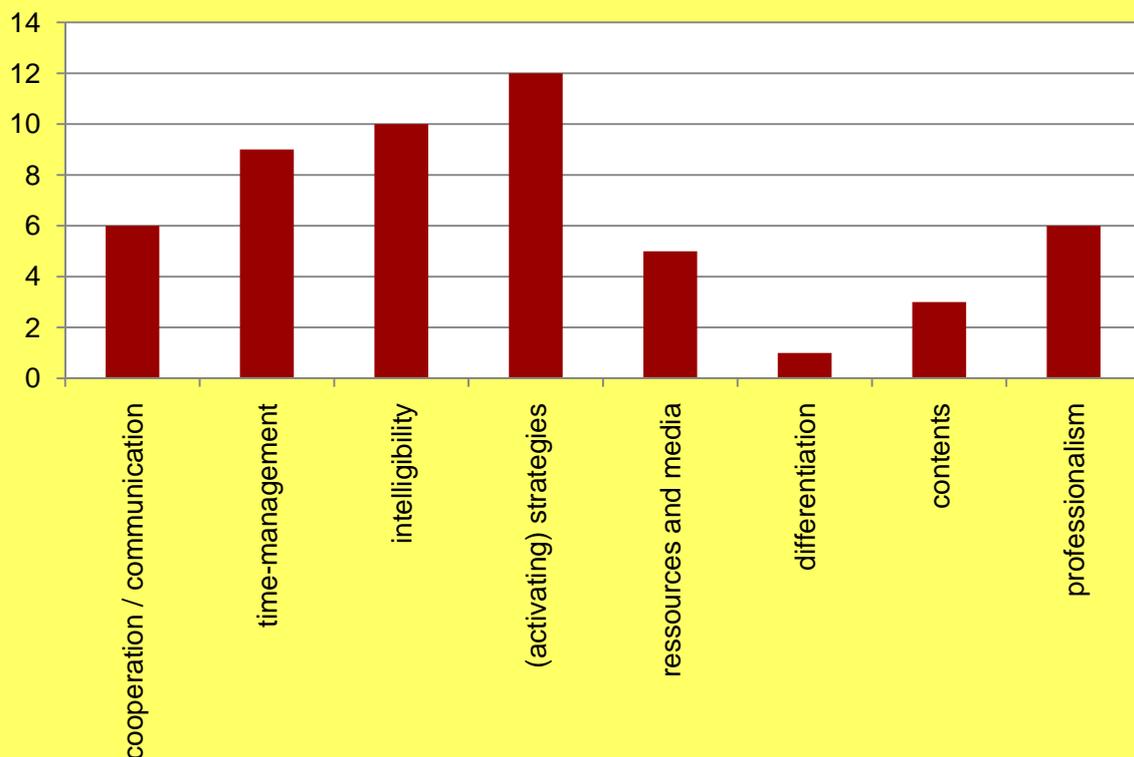


Fig. 4: Negative feedback to EPIZ-courses in 2010 (source: Schulz 2012, 44)

Obviously there are fundamental differences in perspective between NGOs and the formal education system in relation to all three components. Yet, there is also a marked similarity

which is the aim to acquaint young people with ideas concerning sustainable development. To do this successfully both partners need to understand that the competences of the other are not just different, but may enrich their own work.

3. Student teachers developing lesson proposals in cooperation with NGOs

In the summer term 2010 future geography teachers at Potsdam University were offered a project course unpretentiously entitled “Education for Sustainable Development”. It was run in collaboration with three NGOs, two of which were located in Berlin. The other was located in Potsdam itself. All three NGOs had different foci and backgrounds: BUNDjugend is the youth organisation of BUND an NGO specialised in environmental issues such as oceans, biodiversity, nuclear power and mobility. Its youth organisation offers young people the opportunity to get involved in political discourse and action, and in that context also focusses on education. The NGO has local groups all over Germany. EPIZ is the acronym for “Entwicklungs-politisches Bildungs- und Informationszentrum” which means as much as centre for developmental education and information (or Global Education Center). It is located in Berlin and specialises in different fields of education such as workshops for professional development for teachers or production of teaching materials. It focusses on development issues such as human rights, fair trade and intercultural communication. Missio is a missionary organisation of the Catholic Church that supports churches in Africa, Asia and Oceania by training their professionals. In Germany they engage in educational work that emphasizes interreligious dialog, human rights and work for peace. All three of these NGOs were asked to name themes they would like the student teachers to get involved with (tab. 1).

NGO	Themes offered	No. of student teachers
BUNDjugend	Culture and consumption	1
	Energy and resources	0
	Food and agriculture	1
	Water	0
EPIZ	Office work orRetail	1
	Oil	2
missio	Young people and violence (South Africa)	1
	Migration and pluralism in Nigeria	1
	Soy production in Brazil	1

Tab. 1: Themes offered by NGOs and number of student teachers that worked on them

The number of participants in the course was restricted to ten, but there were hardly more applications anyway. To be admitted to the course the student teachers had to pass two other courses, one on innovative teaching strategies and another one on the application of media in

the geography classroom. One of the students who were admitted quit the course after the first session saying that he didn't want to invest the amount of work necessary to succeed. A few sessions later another student quit claiming he was unable to make contact to the NGO. This left eight student teachers in the course, all of whom handed in teaching material including a theoretical background and a portfolio in which they reflected the progression of their work. Two student teachers worked in a group. In the following paragraphs I will treat them as one student to protect the anonymity of student teachers as well as NGOs.

Some themes were slightly changed during the cooperation. "Migration and pluralism in Nigeria" was broadened to encompass the whole of Africa and "Young people and violence" became "HIV in Africa". The student teacher who had the choice between "Office work" and "Retail" decided to work on the retail rather than the office sector.

Three of the papers that were handed in by the student teachers were way above average in relation to quality as well as quantity of the work done. One, unfortunately, did not meet the standards. The other three were of mixed quality ranging from good to satisfactory. Of course it may be asked if these outcomes were strongly influenced by the NGOs the student teachers cooperated with. Or to put it another way: are student teachers disadvantaged, if the cooperation seems unsatisfactory? Taking the reflections of the portfolios as a feedback, there is no evidence that would support such an assumption. Overall the student teachers were really pleased with the cooperation. Only one student teacher said that, although the experience was worth the effort, he was disappointed by the feedback he received from the NGO. The student teacher who failed the course did give a rather positive feedback and admitted her own problems accomplishing the work. Interestingly enough she cooperated with the same NGO as one of the top student teachers. But although a dissatisfactory cooperation did not necessarily lead to failure, it still seems that in this group the more able student teachers profited more from the cooperation with an NGO than the others, as they knew how to use the opportunities offered to them.

When considering the student teachers' feedback in relation to the model of curriculum planning some of the differences described surface and others seem less problematic. One of the problems that did not arise was the difference between the subject content knowledge that underlies geography as a school subject and content as understood by the NGOs. This may be due to the student teachers' not relating their course work to the curricula, but to their experience of the subject at the university, which is a lot broader than school geography. Only in one instant did the student teacher say that he felt incapable of meeting the NGOs expectations as the NGO wanted to treat the topic from a range of different perspectives (music, chemistry etc.) and he himself only felt comfortable with geography and his second subject. As to the expert knowledge of the NGOs three student teachers said that they were provided with profound information that stimulated their thinking. In two cases this information was felt to be rather too specialised so that the student teachers were not able to use it to its full extend. Both of the students underlined that it was important though as it served as background knowledge which helped them decide on what to include or which illustrative examples to create. Apart from these three student teachers, all the others either researched the information needed by themselves or in two cases used little or no substantial information.

With respect to the pedagogical process the three student teachers that felt they were provided with ample information also experienced themselves as the experts for teaching strategies. Two of them used a wide range of the strategies that were taught in the course on innovative teaching strategies such a diamond ranking, the traffic light game, the compass rose and the four-corner-method, while the other confined himself to using role play. This does not mean that the other student teachers did not use strategies but it seems they did not experience it as the expert knowledge they brought into the cooperation. Sometimes it seemed rather the other way round. At least in relation to the question of the teaching principles some of the NGOs had rather fixed expectations that included that the proposals should enable them to hold workshops using activating teaching strategies or that they preferred a flexible modular system they could use from year 7 to 11.

The component of the social purpose was not felt as a problem by most of the student teachers. This may be due to the good reputation of NGOs as discussed above or to the fact that all three NGOs were more specialized in education than others, but it may also be due to the student teachers' limited experience of school reality. Interestingly enough, two of the student teachers did voice concern that they might be expected to interpret their topic from a more religious perspective, but these fears did not materialize – rather the opposite they felt they had received a lot of support and been given a lot of freedom at the same time.

Overall the student teachers said that although the project was time consuming, it was also very fruitful and offered them new experiences they would not want to miss. One student teacher was extremely happy with the long and lively discussions he had with his partner. Nevertheless a number of student teachers felt that the cooperation between the university and the NGOs should be intensified in the form that members of the NGOs should take part in one of the first and one of the last sessions of the course, first to introduce their work to the group and at the end to share the results of all student teachers.

4. Conclusion

The successful cooperation of teacher training institutions or schools with NGOs needs an open approach on both sides. Both partners have strengths that can be combined to reach a common goal which is to acquaint young people to issues of sustainable development. The strengths – but also the weaknesses – that both partners brought to the cooperation were most clearly seen by the more reflective student teachers. These more critical student teachers are those that are desperately needed to succeed in educating future citizens who are able to analyse and judge controversial issues. It is therefore advisable not to deny the different perspectives of the formal education system and the NGOs. To use these differences efficiently both sides need to be able to understand the needs of the other, which also entails entering into an intensive communication process. Unfortunately, this is very often seen as very time consuming, especially considering restricted resources on both sides. Nevertheless, the time seems well invested as the feedback from the student teachers clearly indicates that what was valued most was the possibility to learn about new perspectives which helped them shape their own ideas.

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