# Teaching the Virtues of Sustainability as Flourishing to Undergraduate Business Students

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## Abstract

*Business leaders have a major influence over the achievement of a truly sustainable world; however to do this such leaders need knowledge, which can provide them with convictions that alter both their individual behaviour and their approach to business. Unfortunately in most business schools sustainability is presented as just another strategy for maximising profits. This article describes an undergraduate sustainability course for business students which has transformative potential. Students are exposed to the neo-classical worldview underlying business-as-usual and are challenged to examine what needs to change to reach the goal of sustainability-as-flourishing. More importantly students are helped to draw their own conclusions about the implications of this change for them personally. The uniqueness of this course lies in the fact that students are given the means and tools to action change by introducing them to a virtue ethics framework. This framework provides a blueprint for how individuals can contribute to achieving sustainability as flourishing through the daily practice of virtue and the inspiration of moral exemplars.*

## Introduction

Transformative leaders need knowledge, which can provide them with convictions that alter both their individual behaviour and their approach to business.

More and more business schools are incorporating sustainability into their curricula (Christensen, Peirce, Hartman, Hoffman, & Carrier, 2007; Sroufe & Ramos, 2011; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008); however, more often than not sustainability becomes just another strategy for maximising profits (Amaeshi, March, 2013). This is because sustainability is often taught within the traditional neo-classical paradigm thereby eliminating any potentially transformative discussions, ideas, or ideals. Obviously business academics themselves need to be transformed if any progress is to be made towards incorporating courses which have the potential to change the mind-sets of business students to realise that business cannot be anything but sustainable. This article describes an undergraduate sustainability course for business students which has transformative potential. Anecdotal evidence indicates that not a small number of students became firmly convinced of the need for business and individuals to adapt to the requirements of sustainability as flourishing (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013); more importantly these convictions were put into action.

The course was carefully designed to help students come to their own conclusion about the link between the current state of the planet, business, the neo-classical paradigm and ultimately their own habits such as spending patterns and other uses of resources. They convinced themselves of the need to take the path of sustainability as flourishing for human and other life on Earth forever; that sustainability is about being ethical (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013). This made it possible and appropriate to base some parts of the course and assessment on virtue ethics theory, facilitating the development of virtues for a sustainable life. A virtue ethics framework provided guidance and legitimacy to both the course tasks, and explanations about how to change personal habits to align with convictions around the need to be sustainable. In addition students were introduced to sustainability

frameworks, strategies and tools which gave them concrete ways to implement their newly discovered knowledge about the right thing to do.

## Sustainability as Flourishing

Evidence suggests that our current way of living is threatening a safe operating space for humanity now and in the future (Rockström et al., 2009). According to Rockström, three of the nine planetary boundaries which define this space have been surpassed and even the consequences of this are not yet fully understood. The nine processes which threaten this space are: climate change; rate of biodiversity loss; interference with the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles; stratospheric ozone depletion; ocean acidification; global freshwater use; change in land use; chemical pollution; and atmospheric aerosol loading. Raworth (2013) modified Rockström's framework by adding eleven social boundaries to define a safe and just operating space for humanity, eight of which have been transgressed. These include food security, income, water and sanitation, health care, education, energy, gender equality, social equity, voice, jobs and resilience. In light of the facts, agencies have developed strategies to help move the planet more squarely into this safe operating place. For example the World Business Council for Sustainable Development's (WBCSD) published report 'Vision 2050' plots a pathway for how business can contribute to ensuring nine billion people can live well, and within the planet's resources by 2050 (WBCSD, 2010). Action 2020 is a framework for transforming this vision into action. As is well known, large scale action is needed urgently if we are to attain this goal (van der Leeuw, Wiek, Harlow, & Buizer, 2012). Indeed, Starik, Rands, Marcus & Clark (2010) reflect this urgency writing as guest editors for a special issue on sustainability

education in the *Academy of Management Learning & Education*:

> Neither the 'business-as-usual' nor the incrementalist reform approaches that most individuals, organisations and societies have employed to address critical global sustainability issues are apparently enough to move us far enough to prevent near-term crisis (p. 377).

One of the challenges overlooked in these strategies is the need for a paradigm shift. There is no questioning of limiting profits but just how we can change the way we operate in order to achieve sustainability in a profitable way (Ehrenfeld, 2000; Stead & Stead, 1994). A paradigm shift could be underway if organisations are willing to ask themselves how much wealth can the earth afford us to earn and how can this wealth accumulation process be fairer?

Business-as-usual operates within the neo-classical worldview (Ghoshal, 2005; Hamilton, 2003). The goals, expectations and customs of business have grown out of the assumptions underlying this paradigm (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005). It is a fragmented worldview that severs the connections and linkages between the individual members and other elements of society and the planet; self-focussed individuals have no sense of obligation to the needs of society (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995). It both assumes and endorses that humans should instinctively pursue their economic self-interest and the market is the neutral arbiter of the competition for scarce resources; extreme individualism reigns supreme (Doppelt, 2012; Lips-Wiersma & Nilakant, 2008; Rosanas, 2008). Increased wealth is the measure of progress and happiness and is possible because human ingenuity will overcome scarcity (Doppelt, 2012; Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013). This worldview is reductionist and unrealistic as it fails to recognise that people, other forms of life and the planet are interconnected and it is ignoring facts, which

if faced could lead to real progress and happiness for everyone. The neo-classical worldview relegates notions such as community, cooperation and connectedness to the peripheral outposts of charities, religious institutions and the nonprofit sector (Ehrenfeld, 2000). It is difficult for organisations to break out of the rat-race of maximising profits for the shareholders as this is what shareholders expect. Consumers expect low prices and organisations need to increase demand to please shareholders. If business tries to tackle sustainability issues within this worldview it will naturally degenerate into business-as-usual.

As is well known, Ehrenfeld (2000) argues that "sustainability is a mere possibility that human and other life will flourish on the Earth forever" (p. 232). He explains that flourishing is much more than survival "but the realization of whatever we humans declare makes life meaningful-justice, freedom and dignity" (p. 233). At the very essence of this worldview is the assumption that human beings are moral agents capable and obliged to take responsibility for others, not rational self-interested utility maximisers; actors who recognise that they are part of a wider system and therefore responsible to that system and its members. The course aims to help students aspire to this goal of sustainability-as-flourishing in their capacity as future business leaders and individuals. A virtue ethics framework was used to facilitate this process since it provides the most appropriate explanation and enabler of sustainability-as-flourishing as opposed to other ethical approaches (Chen, 2012).

**Aristotle's Model of Society**

Ehrenfeld's vision of the person and their relationship to society is not unlike that of Aristotle's. Aristotle explains that the members of a society are interdependent thereby implying they must work

towards a common goal; there are no tensions between each member's goals as by working together all the members are better off (Arjoon, 2000; Solomon, 1992). The common goal in Aristotle's vision, is a society which enables every person to develop himself or herself to the full (materially, culturally and spiritually). This common good necessitates a safe operating space for humanity and so could   incorporate the nine planetary and eleven social boundaries discussed above (Rockström et al., 2009). A pivotal notion in this model is virtue which is key to displacing the goal of self-interest found at the heart of the neo-classical model. This is because in Aristotle's model of society, virtue is the vehicle which ensures that the interests of each individual work in harmony with what is good for the community and the environment as a whole (Arjoon, 2000; Grant, 2011; Mele, 2009; Solomon, 2004)

Aristotle explains virtue as follows: "Human excellence (virtue) will be the dispositions which make one a good man and which cause him to perform his function well" (Aristotle, Trans. 1976, pp. 1106a-1107b). In other words, a life lived in accordance with virtue leads to a flourishing life; humanly successful, ethical and fulfilling (Flynn, 2008; Foot, 2001; Hursthouse, 1999; Hutchinson, 1995).  Mele (2005) distinguishes between moral values and values in general. Living according to *moral* values contributes to the good of the person (virtue) whereas making decisions based on other (non-moral) values does not affect our character or our goodness (Murphy, 1999). For example, many people value success and fame but pursuit of these does not make one a better person in the Aristotelian sense. On the other hand valuing and so striving to acquire courage, humility and honesty would make that person courageous, humble and honest, developing them as a person (Mele, 2005).

But acting virtuously not only contributes to one's own flourishing but to the flourishing of others

and the environment. This is because the notion of virtue implies a relationship of interdependence; virtue by definition places one in a relationship with others and the natural environment (Arjoon, 2000; Solomon, 2004). Environmental virtue ethics merely extends the notion of virtue to the environment and holds that such a virtue ethic should incorporate what kind of dispositions we ought to have and not have toward the environment and the non-human entities that populate it. Therefore flourishing can only be realised in cooperation with others and within the social and environmental parameters mentioned above (Bragues, 2008). In such a framework there is no distinction between self-interest and social/environmental mindedness as acting virtuously takes one to respect others in the community and the natural environmental, while at the same time improving one's character and living a meaningful existence.

This relationship of interdependence between individuals applies equally to organisations (Solomon, 2004); within this worldview business organisations are not autonomous independent elements of society but part of the fabric of society and the natural environment and will contribute to their own flourishing if they work within the boundaries of society and the environment; they are "part and parcel of the communities which created them and the responsibilities they bear are not the products of argument or implicit contracts but intrinsic to their very existence as social entities" (p. 1029). This interconnectedness is recognised and actualised by fostering a culture of virtue amongst those persons in business and in particular business leaders. Another notion closely connected with virtue is the common good. As mentioned above, this is the goal which unites all members of society and represents the good of each and every member, not just the majority. It envisions a society which works for conditions which enable every individual, society and the environment to flourish; it does not exclude the pursuit of private ends

except if this is to the detriment of the common good (Argandona, 1998). It is this vision which needs to be recognised and embraced specifically by business leaders.

**Aristotle and Sustainability as Flourishing**

Aristotle's vision of society has features which are compatible with the goals and assumptions required to promote sustainability as flourishing. Gladwin et al., (1995) for example, propose sustaincentrism as an alternative to the current paradigm, in which humans are "the stewards of life's continuity on earth" (p. 890). They urge management scholars to "reconceive their domain as one of an organisation-in-full-community, both social and ecological" (p. 896). Balakrishnan, Duvall & Primeaux (2003) also argue that business decision making assumes an integrated universe; decision making should not be restricted to land, labour and capital costs but should question the benefits and losses in regards to social, economic and ecological capital. These alternatives coincide in regards to the interconnectedness between individuals, society and the planet and that sustainable or good decisions are those which take into account the flourishing or good of all of these elements. In both an Aristotelian and sustainable worldview, businesses must accept that their primary role or mission is to achieve flourishing for all and forever and only secondly seek to a reward for doing so; individuals must also accept this mission while organising their private lives in a way which is not detrimental to this goal. This is why the first condition for a genuine attempt at teaching sustainability in a business school is to reframe the purpose of business.

The combination of these differing views around flourishing produces a rich and inspiring goal. For Aristotle flourishing means humanly successful, ethical and fulfilling while for Ehrenfeld (2005) it means

whatever is needed to make life meaningful and emphasises the importance of justice, freedom and dignity. Both notions accommodate the eleven social and nine planetary boundaries of Raworth (2013) and Rockström (2009) respectively and acknowledge that sustainability-as-flourishing can only be achieved collectively as a community. But what is particularly uplifting and enduring about Aristotle's and Ehrenfeld's use of the word flourishing is that it is an all-penetrating process not an output. It calls each person, group and community to make radical changes both materially and morally in order to achieve sustainability as flourishing; a safe, dignified and meaningful space for all humanity. According to Ehrenfeld (2005) this of course requires a radical change in cultural values; a re-education as to what we as members of society should consider to be our priorities. Accordingly a course on sustainability should do nothing less than aim at effecting a change in the minds and hearts of participants so their personal goals align with this new vision of society and business.

To achieve a paradigm shift there must be a change of mind-set and consequent action on the part of everyone but specifically of the business leaders who are to drive this whole process (Gavare & Isaksson, 2001). There is no doubt that sustainability leaders need an impressive range of skills and competencies including being able to: ground the company vision in its context through strategies and policies, operationalise the vision into every day practices and engage and empower stakeholders to be more sustainable (D'Amato & Roome, 2009). Ethical competency is also a must have. D' Amato & Roome argue that leaders must be role models because they practice sustainability inside and outside the company. To move towards a society in which sustainability as flourishing is the goal, leaders must inculcate this vision in both their personal and professional lives. Gladwin et al. (1995) in discussing the importance of strong

transformational leadership to instigate the changes required to achieve a sustainable organisation assert:

> So in the end it boils down to a supreme test of executive courage. There can be no nobler purpose, nor any greater source of inner satisfaction, than to redirect management and enterprise to the cause of ensuring a sustainable future (p. 42).

As already mentioned the vehicle which could ensure that every day personal and professional choices are directed to the accomplishment of noble goals such as the common good or sustainability as flourishing for all, is virtue. Ciulla (1999) explains how true leaders need to have virtues rather than just values. Values are what one believes to be important or morally worthy but one can have values without having to act on them. This is not possible with virtue as to possess a virtue one needs to have acted according to a value so that it becomes part of who they are and how they think (Ciulla, 1999). A virtue reflects a much higher degree of dedication to the specific value. If a leader is someone who is chosen to implement a vision, the preferred leader is the one who already lives their espoused vision; this speaks volumes about their dedication to the cause, their ability to translate ideals into action, their authenticity and their value as a role model.

As will be discussed later, this particular course urges students to adopt a sustainability-as- flourishing worldview, and promotes virtue as a practical means to incorporate this vision firstly into their own lives and to adopt it as a guide to improve the lives of others. Virtues are habits of the mind, heart and will which enable a person to achieve any challenging and yet noble goal; whether that be eradicating slavery or working for a sustainable future for all. Much has been written about the importance of the virtues and character for the development of excellent leaders (Bragues, 2008; Ciulla, 2004; Flynn, 2008; Havard,

2007; Mele, 2009; Sison, 2003; Whetstone, 2005). In this course, the virtue component was inspired by the virtuous leadership framework of Alex Havard (2007). He notes that virtues do not replace professional competence but are essential to it. He focusses on six virtues: prudence, courage, magnanimity, self-control, humility and justice. 1

Magnanimity is being able to have vision and to be able to carry it through to the end. The virtue of magnanimity characterises a person who strives for noble and great goals (Havard, 2007). Again, in the words of Gladwin et al  (1995) "there can be no nobler purpose….than to redirect management and enterprise to the cause of ensuring a sustainable future" (p. 42). The course aims to inspire students to want to make the world better and guides students to carry out magnanimous acts around this goal.

The leader's role is also one of service. He or she needs to be able to recognise the dignity of every person and be prepared to serve them and to work for the good of society; this requires the virtue of humility (Havard 2007). This is a particularly crucial attribute for a sustainability leader who must remember that the vision is about taking responsibility for the lives of their equals often living on the other side of the world to whom they owe no legal obligations; a responsibility which can be easily rationalised in the face of a deeply rooted individualism which dominates our culture and the culture of business in particular. Students are helped to discover the dangers and falsity of a culture which exalts individualism, and to acknowledge that every person has similar dreams, needs and rights as themselves. The virtues of humility and magnanimity ensure that noble ambitions are channelled into serving others.

Prudence or practical wisdom facilitates decision making which safeguards the common good

(Mele, 2009). As Aristotle (Trans. 1976) stated, "a prudent man is able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous for himself…and others" (pp. 1140a-1140b). And as discussed above virtue is the vehicle which ensures that the interests of each individual work in harmony with what is good for the community and the environment as a whole (Arjoon, 2000; Grant, 2011; Mele, 2009; Solomon, 2004). Prudence is crucial at every stage of the decision making process as it is the capacity to know which virtues are called for in a particular situation and the best way to enact those virtues; it guides the information-gathering, judgement and actual decision.

Bragues (2006) nicely describes prudence as the virtue which has the task of guiding action through the thickets of particularity; it assists in pinpointing the appropriate virtues and the way to concretise them in the situation at hand, taking into account all the relevant details and contingencies; ultimately working towards the achievement of the overarching noble purpose. This virtue enables the leader to keep the vision in sight in spite of the pressures from shareholders and the short-term costs of taking the sustainable path. Prudence can also help to avoid rationalization at the judgement stage – to resist twisting the data to suit a pre-conceived notion or support a desired outcome (Roberts & Wood, 2007). This also ensures that the decision-maker does not confuse the receiving of advice with handing over the responsibility for the decision. A prudent leader does not look for scapegoats but accepts that ultimately they must take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. Students are introduced to the systems thinking literature and encouraged to take a systems approach when looking for the causes and solutions to problems. In this way they are taught to think more deeply and critically which is essential for prudent decision making.

As Havard (2007) notes, "Courage is the sacrifice of self for the realization of noble, prudent and just goals" (p. 73). Often courage calls for endurance over time. In essence it is about maintaining one's integrity in the face of opposition. A courageous person is able to calmly and respectfully resist fashionable trends, public vilification or other obstacles in the way of the prudent implementation of strategies in pursuit of noble goals. Driving the move to sustainability is a mammoth task because it entails tackling change on many levels and involves many sectors of society. One needs the ability to persevere both physically and psychologically, over a long period of time, in the face of constant opposition from many different directions when one is perhaps in the minority. The course provides students with opportunities to test their courage by engaging others on sustainability issues. It also helps them to realise that a lack of courage is sometimes due to a lack of knowledge and/or an unwillingness to personally accept the known facts.

To be able to lead others leaders must first be able to lead themselves-they need self-control. This virtue enables a person to direct their passions and emotions to the achievement of the goal at hand. Self-control works with humility to make space for others and the ideal of service (Mele, 2009). Ultimately these two virtues prevent the person from being dominated by their ego. Failure to control the ego leaves the person vulnerable to their desire for power, money and pleasure. This makes it difficult to comprehend how worthwhile and important it is to serve noble goals and undermines the courage to do so. The person loses their sense of mission and their capacity for serving others. And as people in practice do not distinguish between professional and personal abilities this leads to distrust by followers and therefore the leader's ability to lead (Havard 2007). Advocating for sustainability entails asking other people to exercise more self-control. Individuals in their role as consumers, parents,

shareholders, executives and tourists must accept that they contribute to a system, which for so long has shaped our culture but also is threatening people and the planet. Self-control is required to recognize that our needs are really wants; that perhaps the smart-phone can last another year or maybe we can car pool more often. Self-control can play a role in moderating shareholders' return expectations, senior executives' appetite for bonuses, parents' desire to spoil their children, and the desire to buy the third house or take the world trip. But the leader needs to be able to lead from the front. A considerable amount of time in the course is spent on understanding the antecedents and consequences of consumerism and its relationship to sustainability. Students are personally confronted about whether and how they participate in this phenomenon. This leads to discussion and reflection on the difference between needs and wants and the value of self-control.

Justice takes a person to respect the fundamental rights of every individual. It also helps them grasp that working for the rights of every person actually leads to their own flourishing. Individualism destroys this sense of justice as it severs the interconnection between the individuals in a community whether it be local or global. A leader comprehends that their mission is not limited to increasing profit for their company; that working for the common good constrains how they make the profit (Mele, 2009). A leader who is committed to ensuring a sustainable future is implicitly bound to work for justice; for those of the present generation who are starving or lack access to basic necessities and those of the future. The environment also must be treated justly so it can last for future generations. Students participate in an exercise which simulates the injustice of the global distribution of resources which helps them realise that no one deserves to live in poverty.

Aristotle believed that example is the best teacher of virtue (Annas, 2004, 2008) and the course was developed with this very much in mind. This has consequences for the selection of instructors as well as the purpose of the final assessment. This involved students selecting three real sustainability leaders and examining their life and achievements, with the aim of pinpointing and reflecting on the different virtues exhibited in their efforts to build a sustainable world.

**The Course**

As Giacalone (2004) so astutely noted, we need a transcendent business education for the 21$^{st}$ century, an education that offsets tactical reductionism and that frees students from "nine-to-nine life encumbered by materialistic dreams resulting in nightmarish lives" (p. 418). We need a business education that teaches students to "leave a legacy transcending the bottom line" (p. 418), an inheritance that provides a sustainable future for all. The key to such an education, states Giacalone, is aspirational, acknowledging higher order goals such as flourishing, and balancing self-interest with the needs of others. Such an education is "not restricted to testable facts" (p. 418) but rather is built on such notions described above.

As part of an undergraduate Bachelor of Business degree, this introductory course on sustainability and leadership was designed to instigate the change of mind-set and behavior necessary to develop future business leaders that can move society towards sustainability as flourishing. As mentioned above, to help reinforce, guide and provide rationale for such behavior change, aspects of the course content and assessments were based on virtue ethics theory. Change in the sustainability context requires the development of good habits of thinking and acting for the common good which closely resemble the notion of virtue. Virtue explains how individual decisions can take into account

'the other' and therefore the common good (Solomon, 2004). A virtue ethics framework nicely complements a sustainability as flourishing approach to sustainability. The latter represents a return to more of a focus on society as opposed to the exclusive focus on the individual found in the neo-classical paradigm (Balakrishnan et al., 2003). The balancing of the relationship between the environment, society and the economy promoted by this approach to sustainability is not dissimilar to a virtue ethics understanding of individual-societal relations; a state of flourishing for each member of the society and the society and the planet as a whole.

An important part of the course was to help students understand the threats posed for sustainability as flourishing by the business as usual worldview. The course presented the problem of 'sustainababble' (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Engelman, 2013) and how sustainability and sustainable development mean very different things to different people (Engelman, 2013; Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, 2005). The underlying assumptions of the divergent world views were made explicit to expose the causes and consequences of these differences. When this analysis was carried out in light of the undeniable facts about the state of the planet and its future prospects if business continues 'as usual' students were able to recognize the importance of systems thinking and comprehend the real impediments to sustainable business and a sustainable world such as individualism, consumerism, linear systems and manufactured demand (Costanza, Cumberland, Daly, Goodland, & Norgaard, 1997; Doppelt, 2012; Leonard, 2010; Meadows, 2008; Rockström et al., 2009). Students became firmly convinced that business and the economy need to be used as a means to achieve social and environmental goals (Raworth, 2013; Robèrt & Anderson, 2002; Stead & Stead, 1994).

The content and assessment program of this introductory course on sustainability and leadership was designed to reflect Rogers (1994) guidelines for sustainability education. The first of these, the cognitive dimension, involves the mind and involves two types of thinking– critical and systems. The second dimension, affectiveness, embraces an individual's emotional, attitudinal and values development while the existential dimension is about questioning one's place in the world and finding meaning in how one lives. The empowerment dimension involves a sense of ownership, obligation and direction. Finally, the action dimension focusses on informed choices at an individual, social and political level. At the same time, the course content and the assessments also reflected the underlying notion of virtue and human flourishing discussed earlier and, in particular, was implemented with the Havard's (2007) virtues in mind. Rogers' guidelines cohere with a virtue education, which encourages the development of reason and the cultivation of knowledge directed towards human flourishing that is intrinsically rewarding and practical (see e.g. McKenna & Biloslavo, 2011).

Educating students in this course required imparting knowledge about appropriate sustainability virtues and training students to be sustainability leaders (Mintz, 1996). Both these aspects are interrelated in that "through experience [and knowledge] we come to know what is right and proper conduct, while it takes training to be able to reason about alternative courses of action and to choose only those actions which are consistent with the moral virtues" (p. 833). There are two key ideas applied in virtue education to achieve these outcomes. The first of these involves habitual practice (Kupperman, 1999). A central premise of classical virtue ethics is that moral values (i.e. values that are good for one to have and that aim at human flourishing) are developed over time and through continuous practice. As one engages their cognition through
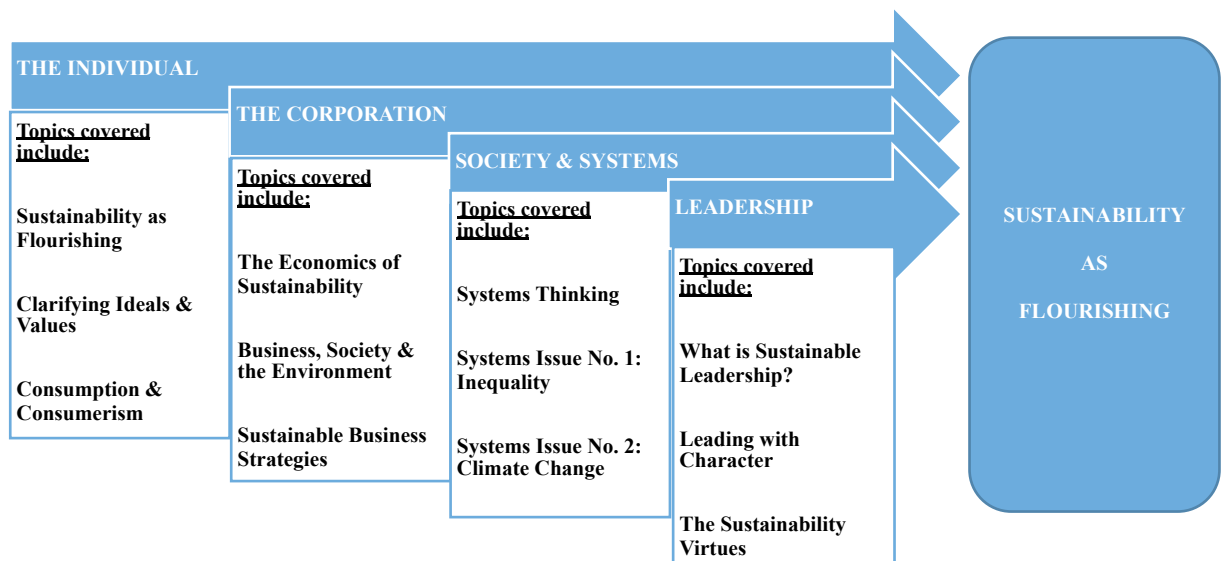
experiences, decisions and actions, they develop a disposition to act in the right way and for the right reasons. A second significant idea in virtue ethics education is the notion of moral exemplars (Kupperman, 1999). By observing good examples set by others, by learning from and then practising what they did over and over again one can also learn to be virtuous (Annas, 2004, 2008). This course's content and assessments were built around these notions of reflective habitual practice and the use of moral exemplars as they related to sustainability as flourishing.

It is important to understand that the focus on virtues and leadership is implicit throughout most of the course. While there might be discussion about virtue ethics and how it might apply to sustainability and leadership, it comes more explicitly towards the end of the course so that it might cap and reinforce what has been previously discovered by students on their own. To do otherwise would be to preach virtues *at* students (Mintz, 1996). Moreover, it also risks giving students the answers before they have worked them out for themselves thereby undermining the process of learning and character development.

The course was divided into four modules incorporating three weeks of classes (of three hours each) covering a range of topics around a coherent theme. Each of these modules was designed to reflect Rogers' (1994) guidelines while, at the same time, teaching and reinforcing the virtues of sustainability as flourishing and encouraging the development of sustainability leaders. The first module's focus is the individual. It addresses the connection between the good life, sustainability as flourishing, the underlying ideals and values which promote or inhibit these potentialities, and the impact of consumption and consumerism. The second module focusses on the corporation and the economy. It critiques existing

economic models and their relationship to business while offering more sustainable alternatives. The third module extends moral concern from the individual and the corporation to wider societal and systemic issues such as climate change and inequality. In this way, each of these modules builds on the previous whilst simultaneously reinforcing what has been taught, discussed and learnt before. The final module brings these ideas together in asking what makes a sustainable leader – the answer being one who practices the virtues of sustainability as flourishing (see Figure 1 for a representation of this process). Each module has several readings and videos that also need to be engaged with. These are deliberately chosen so as not to be heavily academic or opaque. They come from sources such as the media, popular books and YouTube. At this stage of student development around sustainability, it does not seem wise to bombard them with material that is difficult to engage with and runs the risk of not inspiring them (McDonald, 1998). Unfortunately, there is neither the space nor the time to explain the content, exercises and assessment that occurs in each of these areas. Consequently, only two modules will be addressed in detail; others will be described briefly.

**Figure 1: The four modules in the introductory sustainability and leadership course, the topics covered, and how they build on each other.**



| THE INDIVIDUAL | THE CORPORATION | SOCIETY & SYSTEMS | LEADERSHIP | SUSTAINABILITY AS FLOURISHING |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Topics covered include: | Topics covered include: | Topics covered include: | Topics covered include: | |
| Sustainability as Flourishing | The Economics of Sustainability | Systems Thinking | What is Sustainable Leadership? | |
| Clarifying Ideals & Values | Business, Society & the Environment | Systems Issue No. 1: Inequality | Leading with Character | |
| Consumption & Consumerism | Sustainable Business Strategies | Systems Issue No. 2: Climate Change | The Sustainability Virtues | |

In the first module the students are challenged to reflect on themselves as so-called rational self-interested consumers and their relationship to sustainability. As such, they are required to consider the ontological foundations of their beliefs and actions which, in turn, often reveals the underlying dominant neoliberal paradigm that is at play in our society and that affects our most fundamental ways of thinking and being in the world (McKenna & Rooney, 2008). Readings, class slides and multimedia are all targeted towards achieving this goal.

As part of this first module, students participate in weekly in-class exercises designed to challenge their existing worldview and encourage a better understanding of sustainability as flourishing.2 An example of one of these from the first three weeks, *Developing a Personal Values Index*, involves individual students thinking of a good/moral historical person (note the early emphasis on moral exemplars) and writing down five adjectives to describe why they consider this person to be good. Next they are tasked with thinking of a person from history who was bad/immoral and carrying out the same exercise. Once this is completed, students are put into groups to compare lists, and by consensus create a group list of five good and five bad adjectives. Once established, groups report their lists to the class and an attempt is made to create a class list of five good and five bad values that personify an individual. Moreover, these values were written as a continuum with, for example, arrogance at one end and humility at the other.

Such an exercise has real value in that it introduces notions of value/virtue & character early on in the course (the first week), it produces an agreed-on

class list of what constitutes moral and immoral people, and it provides a framework, determined by the students, by which to judge behavior, whether it be their own or that of corporations, as being moral/immoral and sustainable/unsustainable. Interestingly, the final class list often reflects the virtues of sustainability identified earlier. While some such as humility and justice come through strongly, others are indirectly apparent.

At the end of the first three week module, students are given an assessment worth 15% of their total grade that involves a real-life task reflecting on and actioning the virtues required for sustainability as flourishing. These tasks concretize the ideas discussed in class, continue to challenge students' paradigms and worldviews and most importantly, ensure that students enact and hopefully imbue some of these ideas as part of their thinking, and ultimately in their character. The rationale for this assessment comes primarily from Rogers (1994). While his guidelines include cognitive, affective, and existential requirements, which can often be achieved through the in-class exercises, he also emphasises being empowered to act on one's choices and carry them out in practice. This means that students need to engage with others in the real world. The work of Mintz (2006) linking Schön's notion of reflection-in and reflection-on-action to virtue ethics is also relevant here. Essentially, reflection-in-action "entails building new understanding to inform our actions in the situation that is unfolding" (p. 99) while reflection-on-action entails thinking about one's actions after the fact and considering how to apply what one has learned to other situations.

For this first module, the reflective action exercise requires students to attempt two selfless acts. These can be anything as long as they are outside of the student's normal comfort zone and are with strangers. This exercise builds on what has been discussed in class

around the self, consumption, and materialism. The beauty of including such assessments is that they engage with the students' own contexts and are experiential in nature. Such learning is more likely to be more interesting and fruitful then lecturing and classroom exercises alone (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996; Boud & Miller, 1997).

Using Mintz's (2006) notion of reflection-in-action students, before they enacted the exercise, have to think about what selflessness is (e.g., is such a thing even possible), what a selfless act would look like, and how might they go about such deeds. Once the exercise is completed, students are required to practice reflection-on-action, in which they have to describe in detail what happened and why, as well as what they felt during and after the act. Moreover, they need to address several questions about the experience. These include, for example, "how did those you were selfless to react?" and "what did your acts do for the sense of relationship between you and the other person?" Finally, they are asked to reflect on questions such as "how does what we have been discussing in class about personal values, consumption and sustainability relate to your experiences?" and "what has being selfless got to do with sustainability as flourishing?" This exercise allows the lecturer to make indirect links to the need for self-control, humility and magnanimity as living out sustainability involves recognizing one's place in the world and making small choices which involve sacrificing one's preferences for the sake of the flourishing of others; and that prudence helps us be convinced that this is worthwhile and helps us to action our vision. For example an action such as buying a more expensive fair trade product may appear to be a simple act but it encapsulates the exercise of all these virtues. It should be noted that in this and the following two modules reference is only made to behavior/actions which are virtues but these are not presented as virtue at this stage. A more explicit discussion around virtue

occurs in the fourth module, where the different threads of the course are brought together.

To finish off this assessment, students pair with two different partners and exchange reflections. They spend time reading each other's stories, thinking about other people's experiences, and asking questions about what happened and why certain outcomes were produced (Rossouw, 2002). This is done for at least two reasons. First, such interchanging helps cement deeper learning as students relate what they have heard and thought about in class as well as their own experiences of doing the exercise to what they are reading. Secondly, there is an element of role modelling here, so central to a virtue education, as students learn certain values and behaviors from each other's experiences and corresponding actions.

The third module focuses on systemic issues in society that have arisen, at least in part, because of humanity's unsustainable behaviour and because of a lack of good leadership amending such behaviour (Foster, 2015). As part of the three weeks covering this module, students complete several in-class exercises on systems thinking, inequality and climate change. The idea being that students learn the systematic nature of these issues and their potential solutions. Moreover, each of these in-class exercises enhances work done in previous modules.

The in-class exercise on inequality, for example, builds on module two's examination of markets, resources and labour and module one's focus on individualism, self-interest and consumerism. For this exercise students are put into groups based on the population size of a region. For example, North America has approximately 300 million people which represents about 5% of the world's population. In a class of 35 students that equates to approximately 2 people in the North American group. Groups are then

assigned energy resources (represented by a number of chocolate bars) not based on the size of their populations but rather on their regions use of energy. So, for North America, which uses approximately 25% of the world's energy, the students get 25% of the total number of chocolate bars whereas Asia, which has something like 30% of the world's population, but only uses 12% of the world's energy, gets a significantly fewer number of chocolate bars. It doesn't take the students long to realise that if they live in Africa they will probably starve. After this, students are required to engage in a vigorous debate around the merits of this "distribution". The lecturer acts as a facilitator probing with questions such as "do you think this is fair?", "how does this distribution cohere with free market ideology?", "what role does global business play in this process?", "is such a distribution sustainable?" and "what has to happen to change this?" To make this exercise more interesting, groups are often made to argue for other regions other than their own.

Again, there is real value in such exercises for developing the intellectual virtue of prudence or rational judgement which makes it possible to think about what is occurring from an ethical perspective, deliberate on the reasons for actions, and come to a better understanding of why things are the way they are, why we act the way we act and how we can qualitatively improve our decision-making in the future. Students are encouraged to think about how their own daily decisions can exacerbate this inequitable status quo. Such practices also allow the lecturer to focus on other specific virtues relevant to sustainability as flourishing. In the above instance the virtue of justice is explicit. While virtuous character development comes through practicing justice and emulating just people, learning to be just starts with understanding what justice is and is not, and working out how to practise it in smaller actions (van Hooft, 2006). In module four the lecturer will link back to the importance of living the virtue of

justice and prudence for making sustainable decisions which first needs to be lived on a daily basis.

Again, at the end of this module students are presented with a reflective action assessment about another systemic issue that of climate change. As before, this is worth 15% of their total grade and ultimately requires them to go out into the world and put into practice what has been discussed and learnt in the classroom. This reflective action assessment is broken up into four parts. The first part involves reflection-in-action (Mintz, 2006) as students are required to think about and write up the most common excuses they use to avoid being ethical and sustainable. Examples of these include: I don't have enough time, everyone else is doing it, and it costs too much money. They also need to comment on the role these excuses play in their lives as well as their validity. Once this is completed, students answer a series of questions about climate change such as whether they believe it is a pressing issue, what role does business play in the creation of climate change, what role should the government play in reducing climate change and why they think society is so complacent regarding climate change. Much of their answers to these questions link back to material covered in module one and two around self-interest, consumption, markets and the role of business in society. As part of this write up students also discuss how their previous disclosed rationalizations impact their capacity to accept, deal with and make decisions about climate change in their own lives. They are also asked to reflect on how they treated themselves as compared to others in this process. In module four the lecturer will make links to this exercise asking students to reflect to what extent their behaviour resembled humility, magnanimity and self-control.

Once parts one and two are finished, students engage with three people of their choice in a

conversation about climate change. Such conversations are essential to building empathy and consensus both of which are vital ingredients for altering behaviour around climate change (Krznaric, 2008). As part of this conversation they must ask questions such as, "What do you know about climate change?", "What or who causes climate change?", "Whether they think it is an important issue?", "Do they think climate change affects them?" and "What do they believe their responsibility should be towards climate change?" Students are also encouraged to challenge their respondents in areas where they disagree. Upon conclusion of this dialogue, students carry out refection-on-action (Mintz, 2006), writing up responses in the form of a general narrative providing key details about what they said and why and identifying any rationalisations they used and difficulties encountered. Later links will be made to the virtue of courage. The goal of such reflection is threefold. First, it cements learning about climate change covered in class. Second, it helps students learn how to engage with people around climate change. Third, it encourages students to think about their own rationalisations and their validity around climate change in relationship to what others are saying.

The final part of this assessment requires students to choose two actions that help fight climate change. Students are given a list of 10 possible actions including such things as plant a tree, use a clothesline instead of a dryer, and avoid products with a lot of packaging, join a climate change action group and so on. Once completed, they reflect on what they have done, how it made them feel, and how it might inform future action in this area. Again they are asked to consider any difficulties encountered. Module four will discuss how such difficulties can be overcome with the help of virtue. Both this and part of three of the exercise empowers students to act out their learning in the real world (Rogers, 1994). As with all the reflection-action
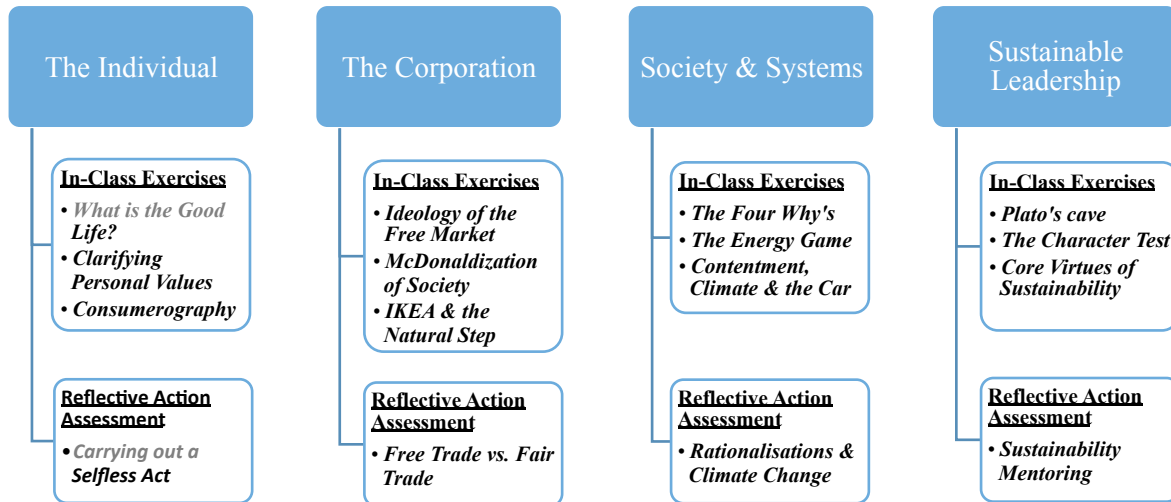
exercises, students underwent a peer review process that enabled them to learn from each other's stories and exemplars.

The above discussion reflects two of the four modules that made up this introductory paper on sustainability and leadership. The other two modules, *The Corporation* and *Sustainable Leadership*, follow a similar pattern with three weeks of classes each of which incorporate a brief lecture/discussion about the topic followed by an in-class exercise built around the broad theme of the module. At the end of each module, students carry out a reflective action exercise that brings together the discussion and learning from the module through real-life practice with the goal of actual social change not only for themselves but also of the world around them. For both of these modules, students undergo a peer review process similar to those described above. When combined with the in-class exercises, this peer review process helps to creates "a moral community where members of the class learn from one another and where discoveries regarding reciprocity can be made" (Rossouw, 2002, p. 428). Creating such an atmosphere implies the teacher facilitates as opposed to conveying knowledge. Their role, in this undergraduate paper, is to create learning experiences conducive to the development of the characteristics necessary for sustainability as flourishing.

In addition to these in-class exercises and the reflective action assessment, at the end of the course students also must write a reflective biographical essay worth 40% of their total grade about a moral exemplar from the nonfiction literature. Given that sustainability as flourishing requires a sustainable economy, society, and environment together (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013), students choose three people (one each from economy, society and environment) from a biographical list of individuals who have initiated change for the

good in each of these areas. For example, in business/economics they can choose individuals such as Ray Anderson, Anita Roddick, and Mohammed Yunus. In society they choose from people such as Melinda Gates, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King. From the environmental literature there are exemplars including Rachel Carson, Caroline Merchant and David Suzuki. Utilising the virtue ethic notions that learning from good role models and repeated reflection and practice instils habitual character traits (Kupperman, 1999), students were required to write a brief biography of each exemplar selected. They then had to critically compare them and analyse their contribution to sustainability as flourishing. Finally, they had to reflect on their chosen leaders' example in terms of their own development as a future leader and in terms of how they might contribute to sustainability as flourishing.

This essay provides a useful means of bringing ideas from course together. It challenges students to think about flourishing through the *praxis* (what they do)*, eidos* (their view of reality) and *ethos* (their way of knowing and sense of purpose) (McKenna & Biloslavo, 2011) of virtuous individuals in the three key areas required for sustainability. This gives students' insight into the thinking, feeling and experiences of leaders in the field. Moral imagination is the ability to change how we construct our understanding of the world in order to act within in it in certain way (Moberg, 2008). To understand sustainability as flourishing, students must conceptualise how this works in real-life. While in-class exercises and the reflections contribute to this, exploring individuals living this out is invaluable. In addition to this, studying such persons can create the cognitive dissonance required for moral development as students compare their character with that of their exemplars (Rossouw, 2002). Figure 2 demonstrates how the exercises and assessments connect within and across each module theme.

| The Individual | The Corporation | Society & Systems | Sustainable Leadership |
|---|---|---|---|
| **In-Class Exercises** <br> • *What is the Good Life?* <br> • *Clarifying Personal Values* <br> • *Consumerography* | **In-Class Exercises** <br> • *Ideology of the Free Market* <br> • *McDonaldization of Society* <br> • *IKEA & the Natural Step* | **In-Class Exercises** <br> • *The Four Why's* <br> • *The Energy Game* <br> • *Contentment, Climate & the Car* | **In-Class Exercises** <br> • *Plato's cave* <br> • *The Character Test* <br> • *Core Virtues of Sustainability* |
| **Reflective Action Assessment** <br> • *Carrying out a Selfless Act* | **Reflective Action Assessment** <br> • *Free Trade vs. Fair Trade* | **Reflective Action Assessment** <br> • *Rationalisations & Climate Change* | **Reflective Action Assessment** <br> • *Sustainability Mentoring* |

**Figure 2: How the in-class exercises and assessments connect within and across the modules**

How might such exercises and assessments relate to the virtues required for sustainability as flourishing and the development of sustainability leaders? Answers to this question have been hinted at already throughout this paper. However, the following provides a more detailed application.

## Biographical Reflective Essay
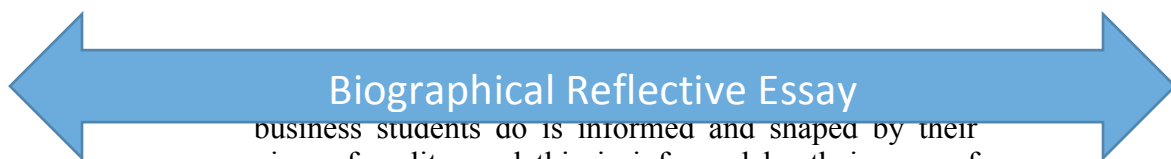
business students do is informed and shaped by their view of reality, and this is informed by their way of knowing and sense of purpose" (p. 698). These tasks involve students examining their experiences, connecting with their emotions, and evaluating theories in light of the virtues that guide behaviour and lead to sustainability as flourishing. This stimulates thinking, reason, understanding and ultimately prudence which is

a key aspect of being virtuous and a sustainability leader. As van Hooft (2006) states, the prudent person is one who implicitly knows what is good for human beings – what would conduce to their fulfilment and thus flourishing – and who acts intelligently in accordance with that understanding. In this way, these activities aid students to appreciate how "particular realities are constructed and how they are part of the process" (Kearins & Springett, 2003, p. 193) and to reframe their worldviews and act accordingly.

In carrying out various aspects of the reflective exercises outside the classroom, students are required to engage with others and build relationships with them. This social engagement requires students to think about what McKenna & Biloslavo (2011) label *alterity* or the capacity for otherness (i.e. an understanding of the other's perspective). Without developing such a comprehension, it becomes difficult to break out of the egocentric individualism that underpins much of our current thinking (Hamilton, 2003) and constrains our capacity for sustainability as flourishing (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013). Moral imagination and sensitivity are the natural outcomes of such a process as students begin to understand the impact of sustainable/unsustainable behaviours on themselves and others.

Such social engagement by students not only builds capacity for moral imagination/sensitivity but also enriches thinking and practice around such virtues as magnanimity and humility. Recall that magnanimous people aim for great things not out of personal interest but because they favor others such as the organization or the wider community (Mele, 2009). These reflective exercises challenge students to align their behavior with their knowledge and to commit to an ideal that goes beyond themselves; an ideal that transcends self-interest, and aims for a world where flourishing is the norm. As stated clearly in the first week of the course, all of the activities aim for this goal. At the same time,

social engagement often involves service to others as in the case of carrying out selfless acts, advocating for and using fair trade products (while also convincing your peers to do so), getting involved in fighting climate change or acquiescing to be a sustainability mentor. Such acts necessitate humility which is the ability to grasp the truth about oneself while recognising the reality and value of others. One cannot lead others if they are unable to see their own limitations and the authentic needs of others.

Many of the activities in this course involve a degree of courage. In coming to terms with sustainability as flourishing as a transcendent goal, students are challenged to step outside their comfort zones to undertake actions that help them imbue this ideal and make it a reality. As discussed above, one of the reflections has them carrying out selfless acts to strangers while another has them trying to convince their family, peers, faith groups and work organisations to buy fair trade products and yet another has them defending climate science and arguing for change. Such tasks are not only designed to encourage practical reasoning and social action but they are also designed to teach perseverance, to keep pushing, often more than once and with different people even when such persons provide obstacles and/or are opposed to the students' advances. Daft (1999), writing about leadership theory, describes several aspects of courage as it pertains to leaders. He argues that courage means "going against the grain, disregarding boundaries, initiating change; pushing beyond the comfort zone to do the right thing; asking for what you want, saying what you think and fighting for what you believe" (p. 380). The reflective action exercises, in particular, apply many of Daft's meanings. Carrying these out every three to four weeks ensures students are constantly required to be courageous in a variety of different contexts; such enactment helps bring about growth in this virtue as it pertains to sustainability as flourishing.

Justice is another key sustainability virtue and is about giving to each what is their right or due. According to Rego, Cunha, & Clegg (2012), justice comprises three areas: fairness, citizenship and leadership. Each of these is met by the course in a number of general ways. Starting with fairness, many of the activities are designed to put the student in the other's shoes, to understand what it would be like to be them. For example, the ideology of the free market exercise in week four asks them to imagine a world where all public services have been privatised and the impact of such action on those with less and on the environment. The energy game in week eight places students in the role of being poor, lacking natural resources and having no means of obtaining more. The reflection at the end of module two has students thinking about fair trade as a viable alternative to free trade for a sustainable future. Many of these activities develop student thinking around what it means to "give everyone a fair chance" and encourages them to treat others, and by extension the environment, as ends in themselves.

Citizenship, as an aspect of justice, "refers to the development of a sense of obligation to the common good in a way that transcends self-interest" (Rego et al., 2012, p. 87). If we replace the notion of "common good" in this quote with that of sustainability as flourishing then we capture what this course and these activities hope to achieve. They seek to develop sustainability leaders that consider themselves responsible for improving the lives of others and the environment (the two of these being mutually inclusive). Interestingly, as Rego et al, note, fairness and citizenship reveal reciprocal influences in that good citizens tend to be fairer and fair people tend to make better citizens. The culmination of practicing an imbued fairness and citizenship is a leader who "influences and helps other so that their choices will benefit the

collective" (p. 89). In other words, they get followers to action sustainability as flourishing. The last reflection in this course has students practicing this transformational process by setting up mentoring arrangements with a friend, peer or family member and setting up a number of sustainability goals with them and then working out how to achieve them.

Self-control is necessary to achieve virtuous ends. Failure to be self-controlled could allow the interests of the individual to override the common good (van Hooft, 2006). Perhaps more than the other virtues, self-control was infused throughout the course. While other virtues such as humility, courage and justice were obvious in specific activities, self-control was less so. The critique of the *homo economicus* view of human beings and the effectiveness of the market mechanism to solve complex problems underpins much of this paper. As authors such as Hamilton (2003) and Kasser (2002) have demonstrated, this worldview encourages the acquisition of material wealth above other goals. Consequently, it hinders an individual's capacity to self-regulate appetites and emotions in virtuous ways – in fact, it is likely to encourage excesses such as greed (Wang & Murnighan, 2011).

While not explicit, self-control was the underlying message of all the course activities. It is, as McKenna & Biloslavo (2011) note the essence of all the moral virtues. The activities help students consider whether their values and priorities lead to behaviour which hinders sustainability as flourishing; succumbing to pressure of believing their wants to be needs and having career and life goals which reflect the notion that more is better. As a society we must learn to control our excesses. We must learn to value what is truly important, not in words only, but through our actions. Business leaders in this future sustainable world need to begin understanding this now. This course, and its various activities, motivate students to engage with the

serious issues facing society now. The more they learn about these, their causes and how to deal with them, the more likely they are to navigate a safe passage through them. The more likely they are to achieve sustainability as flourishing.

The virtues demand the repetition of acts in order to grow. It is not enough just to understand and want the virtues, students have to put them into practice in a variety of circumstances in order to acquire authentic habits, and not only the appearance of virtue (Arjoon, 2000). The activities described above are designed to bring about growth in the virtues of sustainability as flourishing. The more students understand and practice these virtues, the easier they find them to carry out in their professional practice. While central to this course, the authors were under no illusion that such activities would alter students in radical or magical ways. In fact, many of the students will already come with an ingrained moral software (Kupperman, 1999). It is the authors' hope that this course will in many cases simply affirm and build on what is already there by linking to notions of sustainability and flourishing. For those students, who don't have a strong conception of virtue, it is our desire that this course and these critically reflexive activities will reboot their software in such a way that, at the very least, they comprehend the urgency of what confronts humanity.

**Conclusion**

This article outlined some of the key features of Leadership for Sustainability, an introductory subject for undergraduate business students. It explained how the course presents students with the facts about the planet, its people and the role of business in the current state of affairs. Students are exposed to the neo-classical worldview underlying business-as-usual and are challenged to examine: whether this is a sustainable

worldview; which are the possible alternatives; and what needs to change to reach the goal of sustainability as flourishing. As discussed above, sustainability as flourishing calls each person, group and community to make radical changes both materially and morally in order to achieve sustainability as flourishing; a safe, dignified and meaningful space for all humanity.  In particular and perhaps more importantly the students are helped to draw their own conclusions about the implications of this change for them personally. The uniqueness of this course lies in the fact that students are given the means and tools to action change by introducing them to a virtue ethics framework. This framework provides a blueprint for how individuals can contribute to achieving sustainability as flourishing through the daily practice of virtue and the inspiration of moral exemplars. Regular in-class exercises and real-life assessments guide and bolster this process facilitating the development of a sustainability mind-set; minds and hearts which are willing and able to live authentically sustainable lives and have the conviction, wisdom and strength to be leaders for a sustainable future.

**End Notes**

1.  If the focus on the course was on Environmental Leadership, then one might consider using specific environmental virtues (see e.g. Sandler, 2005). However, given the tri-focus of sustainability and the emphasis on business leadership in the course, Harvard's (2007) framwork was better suited.

2.  Several of these exercises have been adapted from Kearins & Springett (2003), McDonald (1998) and Kasser (2013). Others were developed by the authors or taken from public domain.

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