

Motivating sixth forms: paving the way for student action

People & Planet, formerly known as Third World First, focuses on issues of world poverty, human rights and the environment. For the past thirty years, it has worked with university students, increasing their awareness and understanding of global issues, as well as encouraging them to create positive change through effective campaigning. There are now over 150 People & Planet campaign groups at universities around the UK. Meredith Cochrane reports on its work with sixth formers on Fairtrade.

Introduction: Fairtrade Action

People & Planet extended its education and campaigning work into sixth form colleges and schools in September 1999 with the introduction of a project called 'Fairtrade Action'. In line with our philosophy, the project not only raises awareness of global issues (specifically Fairtrade), but also encourages learning to be applied through positive campaigning action. This article will discuss the approaches that the project takes to motivate sixth forms to take action, the challenges we have faced, and how we plan to address them.

Fairtrade was chosen as the focal issue for the project because it is an accessible way to introduce the concept of global links with everyday activities and explore responsibility at a global level. The Fairtrade issue provides opportunities for students to initiate simple and positive awareness-raising activities such as organising tasting stalls, assemblies, parents' evenings, and campaigns at school. Equally important, it has widespread appeal to teachers of various subject areas and can be applied to meet the needs of the curriculum.

People & Planet has become involved with approximately 250 schools in the past two years, primarily through workshops on Fairtrade delivered by our graduate interns. Education and raised awareness is a direct outcome of attending the workshop. However, motivating students to take action is a process that is dependent upon the specific design of each of the workshop's four sections. I will discuss each section in turn to consider how its design motivates students, as well as the patterns of student response we have received. Following this, I will assess whether (and why) students do, or do not, turn their initial enthusiasm into meaningful awareness-raising action.

A call to action: the Fairtrade Action Workshop

It is important to highlight here that an interactive approach is taken throughout the workshop. This active learning is essential as it allows students to come to their own realisations and conclusions rather than passively being informed. We have found this has a direct and positive correlation with the action students subsequently initiate.

Workshop section one: Accepting the local-global interconnection

The workshop begins with students identifying the countries with which they interact directly or indirectly through various aspects of their lives such as food, clothing, politics, the

environment and entertainment. This encourages students to recognise and accept the role they play everyday in the global economy. Highlighting these local-global links at the outset emphasises that Fairtrade is not an issue of charity towards a distant population but a means of taking responsibility for one's own actions and the effects they have on people globally.

This introductory exercise has met with enthusiasm, and the speed with which students complete it indicates that they are fully aware of local-global links. We have found that rather than introducing students to their global role, the exercise simply reiterates a fact that is taken for granted.

Workshop section two: Identifying the issue

Before the discussion moves further, students are asked to list their minimum criteria of fair conditions for any worker. The resulting list usually covers most of the actual Fairtrade criteria, considering not only the issue of receiving fair pay, but also being valued, and having a voice within one's workplace. Completing this exercise ensures that when students are exposed to non-Fairtrade practices they are clear that these contradict what they themselves defined as requisite. This active identification of global injustices encourages them to then become active in pursuing solutions.

Once these minimum conditions are established and agreed upon, financial and structural inequalities within the global trading system are identified. A variety of games are played to highlight the workers' issues such as meeting basic needs, the powerlessness they feel within their circumstances, and the lack of alternatives available.

The workshop's climax is the presentation of case studies illustrating the harsh realities of working on non-Fairtrade plantations. It often provokes an emotional response as its serious tone contrasts with the lighthearted nature of the first half of the presentation, and it gives previously abstract issues a human face.

Students have expressed feelings of betrayal by government, media and companies and indicate that they believe it is an unacceptable situation about which something must be done. Some of the received reactions include: "Why wouldn't anyone tell people about this?" "Why do companies buy from these estates?" and "Somebody must be able to do something to stop it". Although there is the potential for endless questions and discussion, it is important to show students that they can take action before feelings of despair and defeat set in.

Workshop section three: Fairtrade as a solution

Fairtrade is presented as a solution and illustrated through case studies.

Students tend to adopt a charitable attitude despite recognising that consumption is accompanied by consumer responsibility. Therefore it is essential to reiterate that Fairtrade is an issue of justice rather than charity. This is addressed by referring to the conditions they themselves have identified as fair.

Many students are also sceptical that Fairtrade is corrupt or motivated by profit. We take some time in answering questions to allay any scepticism or confusion and ensure therefore that students are open to taking action themselves.

Workshop section four: Taking action

This final section directly confronts the question of what students can do to increase awareness of Fairtrade and consequently its benefits. Students break into groups and design action plans to raise awareness within the school and the community. The end of the presentation allows time for interested students to speak to staff about taking action. Typically between 5% and 15% of the students remain and indicate an interest in awareness-raising.

Post-visit: the path to Fairtrade or road blockade?

The enthusiasm we receive during school visits indicates that we are doing something right. However, it is whether this enthusiasm translates into action, which determines the extent of the project's lasting impact.

First, a high proportion of students are prepared to accept responsibility, recognise their consumer power, and consequently buy Fairtrade. We underestimated the number of students that would adopt new consumer habits as we anticipated that the independence and identity built around consumerism during teenage years would act as an obstacle. Contrary to this, the responsibility of changing consumer behaviour seems to be accepted amongst students as an extension of the independence they associate with consumerism.

Secondly, we have had mixed success in encouraging Sixth Forms to take awareness-raising action. At approximately 90% of schools, some activity is initiated following the visit. This includes activities such as holding a Fairtrade assembly, having a tasting stall, or introducing Fairtrade products to the staff room. However, often the initiatives are 'one-offs' rather than continuing throughout the academic year. We have identified two current obstacles to ongoing student action.

Obstacle one: the time issue

The first reason underlying these short bursts of action is a practical problem that we are currently addressing. Teachers have little time to spare and therefore, despite good intentions, cannot give sufficient support. Responding to this, we have begun to not only provide support from the office, but also link students with local university groups and local Development Education Centres.

Obstacle two: global events versus global issues

Awareness-raising, which is most effective through long-term and ongoing activity, falls victim to a problem which is endemic in both media and society. Through the media, global issues are sensationalised and exposed primarily during crises. These crises are simplified and presented as events rather than the deep-rooted issues of which they are symptomatic. As a result, the responses to problems designed within society are also 'events' rather than the long-term solutions needed to address the root causes. Schools mirror this with activities centring around charity events rather than ongoing activities. This has made events like Fairtrade Fortnight very successful but makes the prospect of students forming active and ongoing groups less likely.

This obstacle is difficult to address as its roots lie beyond both the project and schools. We have responded by designing a campaign that requires students to organise many small events that link together to achieve a longer-term goal. Students must complete small-scale activities such as hosting a tasting stall, holding an assembly and introducing Fairtrade to the common room before they reach the longer-term goal of becoming a 'Fairtrade School'. We hope that once students have achieved the Fairtrade status for their school, they will have made the shift from events-organising to ongoing campaigning and will then continue to campaign in the school and community.

Conclusion

This project aims not only to educate students, but also to encourage them to take ongoing action. The workshop has succeeded in motivating students by taking an interactive approach and providing opportunities for students to identify problems and design their own solutions.

It is, however, where we have faced the greatest difficulty that the most important lesson lies. Although students clearly understand that trade issues are ongoing, they still tend to mirror societal responses and revert to single 'events' as a solution. The design of the Fairtrade campaign offers a temporary fix by offering a long-term goal made up of multiple events. However, it is still important that students themselves recognise the need to adopt long-term action. This is an issue that must be addressed within media, society and the design of 'charity events' within schools themselves.

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