

# Global Public Health and Environmental Issues: Teaching as if the Future Matters

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## ABSTRACT

*We detail an approach to teaching a global public health and environmental issues course which put more of an emphasis on health for all, use of technology in regards to environmental issues, global violence, and politics. Examples of activities to use in teaching the class are highlighted. We try to get students to think about the future of public health and environmental issues.*

*Umwelt und Gesundheit Online, 2010; 3, 4-7.*

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## Background

Ten years into the new millennium, it is now time to take stock of the world situation and ask whether the human race as a whole is making progress towards dealing with global health and environmental issues. Can we as public health and environmental professionals afford to avoid this question? Can we risk the consequences of ignoring it?

To what extent should we encourage public health and environmental students, as the next generation, to confront evident global dangers? Are there ways to teaching that encourage students to consider ominous global predicament authentically and resolutely, in a way that supports them to personal meaning and new professional directions?

Students in public health programs must be educated on important issues, such as health for all, the use of technology in dealing with environmental issues, global violence and justice, among others. We must be preparing public health professional to consider the challenge to live to promote globally responsibly and ethnics.

We must move beyond epistemological issues (questions of knowing) to address ontological questions (the development of a human from birth to old age) that speak to our understanding of reality, meaning, and being. What follows is our suggested approach to teaching a course entitled *Public Health and Environmental Health in a Global Context*.

## Five Main Premises of Course

The course in public health and environmental health in global context was five main premises:

- Health cannot be understood apart from the environment that sustains it and the social and political structures that act to promote or undermine it.

- International trade and travel, instantaneous electronic communications, and competing global concerns mean that poverty, disease, war, and environmental degradation know no national boundaries.
- Choices made now will affect generations to come. Thus, ethical decision-making requires responding to present needs in a way that does not diminish quality of life for future generations.
- Learning must engage not only the mind, but also the heart and soul if students are to care passionately about the future.
- A useful, productive health and environmental science for the future will increasingly grapple with the meaning of public health and the environment in a global context.

## An Ambitious Undertaking

With the aforementioned premises and with focal themes as global justice, health for all, environmental sustainability, futures thinking, responsible citizenship, and the expansion of health and environmental theory, teaching such a course is an ambitious undertaking. This course, which we would suggest be taught in the 4th year of an undergraduate program or in a Master's degree program in Public Health or Environmental Health, asks students to consider how these premises are addressed when one considers the health of humanity and the state of the environment, now and in the future.

*What is most important of all?* This question calls for thinking and invites learning. Students who are used to having concepts presented and explained have difficulty with this question and seek to narrow and qualify it. Students would probably begin by saying that values and objectives such as health,

safety, education, access to meaningful work, love and belonging, and marriage and family are most important. We have found that further discussion leads students to consider: the future of the society in which they live, the capacity of individuals to influence political decisions, the international context of society, the importance of global stability, freedom from war and violence, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. Usually students reach a conclusion that their greatest concern is the “continuing existence and flourishing of human civilization.”

*How well are we doing?* In this part of the course, students confront the evidence that continued existence cannot be assumed. Students tend to grapple with the effects of population growth, environmental degradation, worldwide diseases and injuries, and social inequity on health. They also consider the relationship among individualistic/materialistic values, environmental sustainability, technology, and global conflict. By advocating for the prevention, termination, or mitigation of war, the role of public health and environmental professionals in the protection of health and the environment is explored. Many penetrating questions arise about the viability of international political efforts, the effectiveness of strategies to address global health and environmental disparities, and the suitability of health and environmental professional for peace efforts. If they are available to speak to your class, have experts in futurism, political science, environmental issues, health care issues in underserved areas, international development agencies, and non-governmental organizations present and engage with the students.

### **Moving from the Theoretical to the Personal – Classroom Papers and Exercises**

Have students think and write about who they are, the experiences and values that have shaped them, the wisdom and advice received from their forebears, the extent to which this has, or has not, stood them in good stead. Students identify the hopes that their parents have for their happiness and prosperity, remember and reconnect with the values of their ancestors, e.g., respect for elders, living in harmony with nature such as spending time in the forest or near a waterway, and nurturing community, recalling how their parents and grandparents came to the USA to escape hardship, persecution, war, etc.

Students tend to speak of the demand for financial security and material acquisition and its effect on quality of life. We try to encourage students to talk about how technology enables human connection and enhances or diminishes quality of life (cell phone,

texting, computers, etc.). This critical view of technology sets the stage for later discussion on technology’s role in a preferred future.

Have the students write an imaginary letter to their grandchildren where they reflect on life as it is now, discuss what has been achieved that is of significance, highlight what remains as a source of concern, relate lessons learned about what is important in life, discuss most fervent hopes for their grandchildren’s futures. The students should focus on social and political context of health, respect for the environment, freedom, peace, global kinship. Some activities include the following:

- Have students write a personal narrative on the experience of living through the crisis of 11 September 2001 or some other contemporary disaster related event.
- Students discuss what their reflections taught them about themselves.
- Discussion then moves to the effect of such events on health and the environment as a global issue and about a preferred future.
- What develops is a clearer perspective on the fragility of life, precarious nature of war/peace, and desire to resolve conflicts in different ways.
- Such dialog provides an opportunity to launch discussion and videos documenting the experiences around the globe who are coping with political unrest and war, and to consider in greater depth the impact of war on public health and the environment.
- Generally, the classroom activities help deepen the students’ appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life on the planet and for the nature of health as a complex phenomenon that draws upon technological, social, political, economic, and environmental considerations.
- Students learn that the degradation of the physical environment surfaces as an overriding health concern, stimulating a desire to conserve the environment, and that the root causes of global conflict and the need for humanitarian relief, and that global issues come with a price.

### **Supporting Engagement and Meaning**

Much of the course material and learning activities are emotionally demanding; it is important that both students and the teacher learn/struggle together in the discussion. We use an article from Rogers and Tough (1996) that helps students recognize that their feelings of disillusionment and distress are not

uncommon, but rather a necessary step toward an expanded worldview.

### Systematic Thinking about the Future

Have students use tools based on futurist thinking. Students should be encouraged to work with different types of futures (Bezold & Hancock, 1996):

- Possible futures (what may happen);
- Plausible futures (what could happen);
- Probable futures (what likely will happen); and
- Preferable futures (what we want to have happen).

By working with trends and looking at different scenarios, students can grasp the future based upon ones vision of a preferred future, the choices and commitments that one makes, and the actions one takes now.

### Trying to Make a Difference

Our objective in the latter part of the course is to have the students become energized for action. We focus on positive signs and life-affirming actions that are being taken around the globe to preserve humanity, public health, and the environment. Students engage with guest speakers and show poster presentations on global public health and environmental issues and actions taken locally, nationally, and internationally to address these issues and sustain hope. At this stage of the course, it is not uncommon for students to inquire about and make plans for careers and/or volunteer work with international health and environmental agencies and groups. Some classes have raised money or sent supplies to support important international development and relief efforts. The recent earthquakes in Haiti (United States Geological Survey [USGS], 2010a) and Chile (USGS, 2010b) are good examples of needed international support.

### Expanding Public Health Theory

Students are asked (through class discussion and major papers developed) to which the public health theory accommodates their understanding of key meta-paradigm concepts such as person, health, environment, and public health. Kleffel (1996) asserts that public health professionals in general do not understand the interrelations between social, political, and economic structures and the origins of health and illness, and that public health theory does not adequately describe the concept of the environment.

We have the students offer informed judgments about the validity of these statements.

Students are asked to consider how public health could provide a stronger framework for thinking that safeguards the physical world and refutes forms of oppression and domination. We further encourage students to think about how public health and environmental could be different if expanded understandings of health and environment were brought to bear in public health and environmental health practice.

### Final Comments

Even though the approach to teaching this course was new to most students, the students were positive about its capacity to stimulate deeper thinking and to call them to a more socially and environmentally responsible way of being and acting. We welcomed the interest in having students to become fully engaged in addressing crucial global public health and environmental issues and understanding the choices that can be made. The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made, and the making of those pathways changes both the maker and the destinations (Schaar, n.d.).

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