

## Research article

# Best intentions gone wrong? Lessons learnt from a decade of teaching in sustainable film-making practice by an eco-enthusiastic educator

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## Abstract

Over the last decade, many UK universities have sought to embed and evidence the UN Sustainable Development Goals across all their curricula and subjects, with varying degrees of success. This article is an educator's reflective account of the different attempts made between 2012 and 2024 to teach sustainable film-making practice in undergraduate film programmes at two institutions, and the lessons learnt from those experiences. Despite plenty of enthusiasm and recognition, the overarching sentiment is that staff and student engagement has often been superficial. The article investigates such challenges as: embedding sustainable practice as education versus offering it as co-curricular training; grappling with university quality procedures and student satisfaction; and establishing sustainable practice as a culture or narrative across a programme and staff team. Unsurprisingly, there is evidence that the enthusiasm for sustainable film-making practice is not always shared by everybody, and engagement with it needs some significant scaffolding and contextualisation, or it risks having the adverse effect of pushing staff and students away from the topic. Without nuance and thoughtful application, it can be perceived as 'box ticking'. Having demonstrated the mistakes and challenges that have been encountered, this article will attempt to formulate a series of recommendations for

moving forward. The aim is not to formalise best practice, but to share a road map of experience by an eco-enthusiastic educator who took the long way/wrong way round when teaching sustainable film practice.

**Keywords** environmental sustainability; BAFTA albert; sustainable film practice; SDGs; film-making pedagogy

## Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing demand within universities to address issues of environmental sustainability within various disciplines, and film education is no exception. Despite this, Kohle (2022: 381) argues that it is not 'widely and prominently published as an important aspect of the curriculum'. The responsibility for how the topic will be addressed is often devolved to each programme level, as the nuances of environmental sustainability differ depending on the academic discipline. However, this often results in environmental sustainability being delivered in ad hoc fashion, with staff left to consider how it may fit with the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the modules they teach.

In the United Kingdom, the creation of the BAFTA albert Education Partnership (<https://wearealbert.org/education-partnership/>) has offered progress in this area. The albert carbon calculation tool was originally developed on the BBC's *EastEnders* television series, and it is named after the fictional series location of Albert Square. It was later supported by the British Academy for Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), and developed and disseminated further across the film and television industries, with a training programme that helped to improve carbon literacy in production companies. The Education Partnership developed in recognition of the training that BAFTA albert had been delivering in industry, leading to a source of contemporary content that can be used in higher education film and media programmes. It currently has approximately 50 academic partners. Yet, the question of how best to approach delivery and teaching of the content remains an issue, in that each institution and individual lecturer must utilise it within their own circumstances. Some institutions simply take the industry training 'off the shelf' and deliver it identically to how it would be done in the 'real world' of the screen industries. However, there are some pedagogic concerns about this approach. Its development out of industry training means that the existing structure is somewhat didactic, and it does not involve the students as co-creators of the learning in a way that feels more organic and collaborative (Chawla and Cushing, 2007; Harness and Drossman, 2013).

There are also challenges when deciding where to place the emphasis of environmental sustainability (Chawla and Cushing, 2007; Stagall et al., 2014). In film-making, should we concentrate on the production process or on the final output? Should we focus on students' individual direct actions as consumers or on their indirect actions as collective citizens? The BAFTA albert material includes an element from most perspectives, but it stops short of encouraging collective political activism to campaign for change. University lecturers may feel uncomfortable delivering such a message, even if it were present, but it feels a necessary message:

An analysis of the world's most serious environmental problems, however, suggests that the effect of private actions is limited unless it is combined with organizing for collective public change. If environmental educators confine themselves to fostering private sphere environmentalism, they may in fact be leading students astray. (Chawla and Cushing, 2007: 438)

Most film-making lecturers do not consider themselves to be 'environmental educators', and the fear of 'leading students astray' is palpable when one does not consider oneself to be a specialist in a subject. There is a need to develop teacher confidence in environmental sustainability in many disciplines (Uitto and Saloranta, 2017) and, again, the BAFTA albert Education Partnership can go some way towards addressing this. However, it is unrealistic to expect everyone to become environmental specialists. It is

better to be honest about our anxieties, rather than perpetuating narratives of denial on the basis that we do not feel confident enough, as expressed by Eriksson et al. (2022: 95):

Expressing environmental concern, and acknowledging the emotions connected to climate change and other environmental existential crises is fundamental, since the opposite can lead to detrimental behaviour, like rejection or avoidance, or pursuit of false solutions. We as educators have a special responsibility, since we are one of the professional groups that have been responsible for not speaking up and for the silence that can lead to a social construction of denial.

This article will attempt to address some of these concerns by detailing the lessons learned from over 10 years of engaging with environmental sustainability in film-making education. It will begin with a brief overview of the specific context, which will help to provide a frame of reference for everything that follows. The aim is to answer two research questions:

- What are the lessons learned after 12 years of teaching environmental sustainability in film-making?
- What are the recommendations for those looking to start or improve their delivery of sustainable film-making?

The purpose of these recommendations is to identify some possible solutions to the common challenges that emerge when teaching environmental sustainability in a film-making programme.

## Specific context

This article will analyse a period of teaching between 2012 and 2024. I have taught environmental sustainability, in some form or another, in each academic year throughout this period. The first two years were spent teaching a core module called Film Technology to Level 4 students in the BSc Film Technology degree in Staffordshire University, with approximately one hundred students in each cohort. In those two years, the students worked in groups of four to six people to produce three-minute documentaries as part of their assessment, which were produced with colleagues across faculties and with external clients. The first of these projects, called Farmers on Film, won a Bronze HEFCE Podium award (to coincide with the London Olympics) in 2012. In 2014, I moved to Bournemouth University and delivered environmental sustainability classes to the MA Producing Film & Television students as part of the Developing & Selling Ideas module. Between 2016 and 2019, I ran a Level 4 core module called Film Language on the BA Film degree. Again, the students worked in groups of four to six, and produced three-minute films as part of their assessment, although this time the films were dramas rather than documentaries, based on a creative response to the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aimed at a target audience for La Temps Presse film festival in Paris (recently rebranded as Cinema for Change: <https://www.cinemaforchange.org/>). This assessment, along with other teaching innovations around sustainability, won internal Education for Sustainable Development prizes at Bournemouth University for three consecutive years. Since 2018, I have been part of a team that runs the BAFTA albert Applied Skills for a Sustainable Media Industry module as a co-curricular training opportunity to students across the Faculty of Media and Communications to students on screen-related programmes, undergraduate or postgraduate, at any level. This experience means that I also led and contributed to BAFTA albert's Train the Trainers sessions (2021–4), helping staff in up to 50 other higher education institutions with the ways in which to deliver environmental sustainability in their own programmes.

I have used the term 'eco-enthusiastic educator' to describe myself. I have no formal education in environmental sustainability, but I believe that I adopt eco-friendly behaviours wherever I deem it possible. In the interest of transparency, I currently have an annual footprint of 11.6 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent before offsetting, which is 131 per cent of the UK average of 8.8 tonnes and 184 per cent of the global average of 6.3 tonnes, albeit 2 per cent less than others in my postcode (<https://footprint.wwf.org.uk>). I have been

consistently over the UK and global average for each of the 12 years pertaining to this study. This specific context is included to give an honest account of the circumstances that inform this investigation.

## Embedded core education is better than co-curricular optional training

Within the 12 academic years of this sample, 6 had sustainable film-making embedded in core modules, and the other 6 had optional co-curricular training made available to all student cohorts. The reasoning behind this split is due to institutional quirks rather than pedagogy, but it is worth expanding on the logic for optional co-curricular training first, before explaining why embedded core education is better.

In recent years, the benefits of training have been the availability of the self-contained, industry-certified BAFTA albert Applied Skills for a Sustainable Media Industry module, which can be delivered across various year groups and programmes. It has four simple assessment points that are easy to grade, it is easier to monitor in terms of pass rates and engagement, and it does not need to align with, or be embedded in, a module within each programme. It is a convenient approach that is recognised in wider literature as being understandable, but not necessarily effective:

Given the organisational constraints outlined, it is not surprising that teachers fail to engage students in critical and reflective analyses of environmental issues. Their need to maintain order and award grades on a competitive and objectively perceived basis evokes an avoidance of controversy and critique and instead encourages an emphasis on knowledge which represents consensus and certainty rather than conflict and ambiguity. (Stevenson, 2007: 149)

There are clear drawbacks with this approach. First, there is a level of criticality missing within the BAFTA albert training materials (for example, addressing the fundamental assumptions on which it is based or how BAFTA albert is funded), which would usually be present in an academic context. This is because the materials evolved from the industry training that BAFTA albert developed. While BAFTA albert makes it clear that the materials can be customised to accommodate criticality when embedding it in an educational curriculum, it is difficult to do so when delivering it as short training. Second, it is clear from class registers that women participate more than men when students are encouraged to take additional optional environmental sustainability training. This correlates with women demonstrating better pro-environmental behaviours than men, which is recognised in wider research, rather than being unique to our situation (Chawla and Cushing, 2007). Third, it is difficult to find a time to host additional training in the academic year, as it always seems to collide with something else which impacts on attendance or engagement. Finally, there are two elements which are not reflected in the data collection, but which have been discussed among the staff. There is a sense when delivering the material that many of those who have opted to come already know a great deal about it and are looking to evidence and certify their existing knowledge to industry, rather than necessarily to learn something new. There is also a belief that positioning the material as 'co-curricular training' creates an impression among students that it is surplus to the main curriculum; otherwise, it would be embedded.

What are the benefits of embedding it within a core curriculum, and why is it better? Simply, it addresses most of the drawbacks of the co-curricular training, removing the gender imbalance, the timetable issues and the concerns over criticality, and introducing the subject to those who may not have considered it before. Crucially, it offers an opportunity to learn by doing and reflecting; the students can attempt to make things with environmental narratives while consciously engaging with sustainable production techniques. It also presents an opportunity for longer course narratives, developing the sustainable skills over the duration of a module or a programme, rather than in a short training course.

The problem of how to embed environmental sustainability into a film-making programme remains difficult. Currently, we have opted for an approach whereby the work that industry is doing in this field is

addressed under 'industry practice' ILOs and discussed critically, in much the same way that other themes (workplace culture, representation and so on) would be. Students are then offered the opportunity to go deeper into this area for the assessment, if they wish. Therefore, everyone is introduced to the issue via a core module, but not everyone has to be assessed on it. This is a compromise solution, rather than an ideal one. Again, students who already feel passionate about sustainability will opt for it, while others may choose not to.

It is not easy to compare these two approaches in terms of student satisfaction or achievement, but these few elements point to why embedded core education is better than additional co-curricular training. However, it is best to be cautious of compromise solutions. For example, adopting core, embedded training runs the risk of being seen as drudgery and a tick-box exercise. This leads to the second lesson learned.

## Tangential engagement with the topic can be detrimental or counterproductive

As an eco-enthusiastic educator, it is tempting to look for opportunities to explore environmental themes within whatever you are teaching, even if it is on the periphery of a module. This is virtuous, but it needs some careful consideration. There was some evidence from student feedback (including Programme Team meetings and the National Student Survey) that students wanted to see that environmental sustainability either had clearly articulated alignment to an ILO, or that it was not included at all. Even with good intentions, bad student feedback creates a difficult platform on which to build anything in a university. Ideally, if you are exploring sustainability, you should centre it in the learning and assess everyone on it.

We encountered a dilemma with this. There was institutional reluctance to establish a standalone module (for example, Sustainable Filmmaking), as this arguably siloes the topic, rather than making it a universal characteristic that we would like to establish across the programmes (like risk assessment). Yet, when environmental concerns were embedded informally in an otherwise unrelated module (for example, Film Language), the environmental element was often ignored or not meaningfully engaged with in relation to the broader topic. In the worst cases, where it is difficult to justify spending time on a subject that is outside of the learning outcomes, students would rightly ask, 'Why are we learning this?'

The three-minute drama assessment based on the United Nations SDGs is a good example of this tension. The intention was to use the pre-existing, externally recognised choice of sustainability issues for the students to base the theme of their film upon, while empowering the students to be intrinsically motivated and choose the angle with which they resonated the most (Altekruse and Fischer, 2020; Chawla and Cushing, 2007). However, student feedback indicates that it had the opposite effect, and the very inclusion of the SDGs killed off any intrinsic motivation. They were unenthused about making such a project, and they then pursued it out of the extrinsic motivation of needing to pass the module. This was exemplified when looking at the content of student films, which were often superficial, and which pedalled existing, clichéd tropes of sustainable themes. Because of the ILOs, much of the contact time and the student effort had gone into the logistics of producing the films, rather than demonstrating an active engagement with sustainability topics. This is undesirable and counterproductive.

A later attempt to legitimise the inclusion of the United Nations SDGs was to consider them as part of industry practice of an existing ILO and assessed engagement with the themes. This was marginally more successful, and it allowed for some more time to be devoted to the themes in class. However, there was evidence in seminars that students were still unmotivated by its inclusion, perceived it as regulatory boredom, and would actively seek job roles that took it out of the orbit of their responsibility. This is the opposite of what is desired, which is for everyone to feel that their role contributes to the problem, and to the potential solution. The third lesson gives some indication about how to address this difficult situation.

## Wider engagement with external partners is preferable

There is evidence across the data (grades, attendance, feedback) that students producing films about environmental sustainability with partners from outside the university and resulting in an external-facing output (for example, public screenings) are optimal for a variety of reasons. Primarily, collaborating with external partners strengthened the rationale for 'Why are we doing this?' The assessment was given legitimacy with the external endorsement, and student engagement was dramatically improved when it had an audience beyond the university assessment:

Publicizing videos internally and externally would allow for critical responses through new media venues like blogs and social networks. Broader dissemination could thus enhance students' critical literacy by potentially developing their self-efficacy and internal locus of control. (Harness and Drossman, 2013: 843)

There are two examples of this in the data collection. The Farmers on Film project got support from the National Farmers' Union and recognition from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who met some of the students. The students in the following academic cohort saw their See Green project videos (focusing on the ways in which elderly people could save energy in their homes) shared internationally with various Interreg partners and translated into multiple languages. Both projects were screened in special events at a local film festival, which was presumably empowering for the students. In other years, there were group projects that had the potential for an external output, but that were made wholly by the students (for example, entry in Le Temps Presse festival), which was less successful in terms of establishing engagement with the topic, but which was still better than when there was no obvious external engagement at all.

External collaboration also reduced the reliance on lazy environmental tropes in film-making, as the content was produced with people with expertise. Students recognised their valuable contribution in having to communicate environmental themes in layperson's terms, rather than having to be experts themselves. In the best cases, the students brought their own experiences to the projects, and it was a positive form of collaborative co-construction (Eriksson et al., 2022). Even in the less successful cases, the student engagement with wider citizenship was a benefit and a potential platform for further positive societal experiences, as Chawla and Cushing (2007: 444) state: 'These prosocial experiences of relatedness and agency are the means through which young people develop a lasting sense of civic identity.'

However, there is a concern that the environmental aspect was completely overlooked by the students, and that the process of making something was more important than the content they were making it about. For example, there is some evidence in student feedback that they enjoyed the process of working with external briefs because it pointed towards industry and their expectations of what they will encounter later in their career, while not mentioning the environmental aspect at all.

## Employability is a bonus but be cautious of making it the purpose

It has been convenient when students ask the 'Why are we doing this?' question to point towards industry, and to identify it as useful knowledge and experience to have when approaching employers. While this may be true, there are some reasons to be cautious of making employability the purpose of exploring environmental sustainability. We have found it hard to incorporate the different types of environmental actions (individual, public/private and so on) when approaching solely through the prism of employability. An interesting example of this issue arises with the BAFTA albert training, which used to include a 'pledge' for individuals to identify ways in which they will live more sustainably in their everyday life, regardless of work. Many institutions in the Education Partnership did not feel that they could embed or assess such a requirement in their film or television modules. In recent years, the 'pledge' has altered, and individuals

identify ways in which they will be more sustainable in their production role. This is a dramatic limitation to the topical scope of environmental sustainability. A further problem with the emphasis on employability is that it celebrates individual achievement rather than collective achievement:

The well-known consequence of this credentialling role is that the participants see the 'real' purpose of schooling as the pursuit of individual academic achievements. Schools thereby convey norms of individualism, competition, achievement and independence: norms that prevail in the dominant culture and maintain the existing structure of society. (Stevenson, 2007: 145)

BAFTA's Education Partnership have begun to award certification for student films, providing an end slide for productions that meet the qualifying criteria. This goes some way to celebrating collective achievement, rather than the individual. However, it still places the emphasis on workplace employment behaviour, rather than on ethical lifestyle behaviour.

## Conclusion: best intentions gone wrong?

Writing this article has prompted pedagogical reflection, while also addressing the research questions in identifying the lessons learned and developing recommendations for the delivery of environmentally sustainable film-making education. The recommendations can be summarised as:

- embed environmental sustainability in core film-making modules, if possible
- address and assess it using specific intended learning outcomes
- engage with external groups, if possible, and screen work to wider audiences
- coordinate course narratives to avoid 'green fatigue'
- establish an ethical imperative, rather than an employment one
- delivery should be honest and sincere
- be wary of assumed knowledge and developing shortcuts for scaffolding the topic.

Looking back through the material in the data collection, the journey has clearly been informed through a reflective and iterative process of trial and error. However, the route has not been a steady, progressive, incremental improvement towards a defined solution. There is evidence at our institution that we are demonstrably less successful at delivering environmental sustainability now than we were a few years ago (for example, pass rates on optional training have decreased, and they are not as high as embedded core delivery), so it remains a work in progress requiring constant renegotiation and development. How is it that, with these best intentions, we may be going wrong?

Put simply, not all recommendations are followed. Environmental sustainability still exists among many other wider concerns within a university (for example, student satisfaction and retention), and most of these will trump environmental sustainability in a situation where one of the other factors is an immediate concern. Another issue is staff turnover and module delivery subsequently being changed, which can reset or remove any momentum that may have developed.

Regrettably, eco-enthusiastic educators also may be contributing to the problem of wider engagement, rather than providing a solution. For example, there is evidence that environmental sustainability delivery that is embedded on an ad hoc basis gets presented institutionally as an example of good practice, even though it is not enshrined in any ILOs or formally supported. The concern is that it is used as an example of 'we're already doing that', and that it removes the need to implement meaningful, formal actions. Furthermore, in the absence of any obvious environmental specialist, the eco-enthusiast can become identified as the de facto advocate and representative for anything to do with sustainability within the department, simultaneously relieving everybody else of having to engage with the topic. One should recognise and resist this pattern, and try to draw attention to it, if one believes that it is emerging.

It is likely that similar journeys are going on in multiple institutions, where eco-enthusiastic educators are having to find local solutions to engaging with environmentally sustainable film-making practice. Forums such as the BAFTA albert Education Partnership are useful for sharing such discussions, but further opportunities should be sought for sharing good practice in this field, especially regarding methodological and pedagogic innovation. A lot of existing literature reflects on primary or secondary level education, rather than on universities, and it is not specific to film-making education. There is also a need to determine the ways in which this delivery is (or is not) influencing or impacting wider society in the longer term. Again, the production case studies shared with BAFTA albert Education Partnership are useful for examples from behind the camera, but we need other perspectives too, looking at career trajectories and wider societal influence. Positive examples will offer hope and encouragement, while negative ones will provide an opportunity for improvement. Most crucially, we need to know where our best intentions are delivering on their intended aims, and where they may be going wrong.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Bournemouth University Ethics Committee.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author has been employed by BAFTA albert to provide training to the Education Partnership. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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