

Painting the Town Green: Project Learning and Management Skills

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the pros and cons of our green business course focusing on our local business project and how it relates to management skills. The theoretical underpinning for the article rests in the pedagogy of service learning as part of enhancing student education. In our course, students faced obstacles of scheduling, cost, and caring while assessing the environmentally-friendly practices of local businesses. As instructors, we struggled with gauging learning outcomes and translating project lessons to the students' future management skills. By exploring our experiences, we can grow as educators and promote creative deliberation in ways to best educate our future business leaders who we hope will also become environmental champions.

Keywords: Green business; Management skills; Sustainability; Experiential learning

1. Introduction

Many academic works have cited the importance of teaching “environmental”; “sustainable”; or “green” business classes as a part of a Business School education (Senge, 2010; Welsh and Murray 2003; Cordano, Ellis, & Scherer, 2003; Ryland, 1998). Ryland (1998) points out that in the 1980’s, while the scientific community was engaged in what was happening in the natural environment, the business community was not. A decade later, however, by the mid 1990’s, a green interest group had become part of the Academy of Management. This is in response to a shift in society’s view of the importance of environmental issues and the pressure on organizations to do their part.

Today, the natural environment is an important part of public debate. Consumers are demanding green products from businesses. A 2008 survey conducted by the Boston Consulting Group reported that of the 9,000 consumers surveyed worldwide, the majority indicated that buying green products remains a priority, even in an economic downturn (www.socialfunds.com). The survey results also indicated that 73% of respondents consider it important for companies to have “good environmental records” (www.socialfunds.com). Additionally, many investors are demanding that their stock portfolios contain, or are dominated by, corporations that have green practices. As Paul Dickinson, CEO of Carbon Disclosure Project, noted “Increasingly, investors view good carbon management as a sign of good corporate management” (Senge, 2010). Since 2007, private investment in green companies has topped \$1.248 trillion according to Ethical Markets Media (USA and Brazil) and The Climate Prosperity Alliance (www.ethicalmarkets.com). This includes investments in solar, wind, geothermal, ocean/hydro, energy efficiency and storage, and agriculture (www.ethicalmarkets.com). In some cases, there is new legislation requiring companies to take the environment into consideration. For example, in 2009, President Obama ordered the Transportation Department to issue guidelines to ensure that the nation’s automobiles reach an average fuel efficiency of 35 miles per gallon by 2020, if not earlier (Branigin, Eilperin, & Mufson, 2009).

It has become critical, therefore, that business education include courses that address environmental issues to prepare students for the economic reality they will face upon graduation.

In response, Cordano et al. (2003) instituted a required course in natural capitalism into the curriculum of a business school. The course, “Managing Technology and the Natural Environment” was found to increase environmental sensitivity of students on six measures of environmental concern. These measures included: intended pro-environmental behavior; balance of nature; environmental regulation; personal norms; property rights; and seriousness of pollution problems (Cordano et al., 2003). They argued that environmental courses such as the one listed above, will encourage future business leaders to incorporate environmental implications into their decision making and possibly even produce “environmental champions” in the future (Cordano et al., 2003).

Moreover, Welsh and Murray (2003) taught an interdisciplinary course in sustainability combining students from business, industrial design and environmental studies. They re-designed products for corporate clients. This allowed the students to use sustainable design and a collaborative approach to develop new products. They used principles such as design for the environment (DFE) and designing for extended producer’s responsibility (EPR), resource recovery and biomimicry (Welsh & Murray, 2003). They challenged disciplinary boundaries by creating a space where the disciplines overlapped and intersected. In the end, the corporate clients were as much impressed with the managerial lessons learned (in some cases tried to mimic the students collaborative work by having designers, engineers and managers work together) as they were by the product innovation. The faculty felt that the course empowered students to cross disciplinary boundaries and to drive innovation through sustainable principles (Welsh & Murray, 2003).

Relevant to our course, Senge’s (2010) book “Necessary Revolution” expressed the need to completely rethink our business paradigms. He stated that our responses to even the most recent (2008) economic crisis were short-sighted and that more truly sustainable alternatives to business as usual were needed (Senge, 2010). He pointed out that fundamental shifts in the functions of institutions will be necessary and without them, not only are there obvious problems such as water shortages, climate change, and poverty looming, but that the combinations of these problems may lead to deeper imbalances. The main institutions he spoke of were energy and transportation; food and water; and material waste and toxicity (Senge, 2010).

Many corporations have seen the importance of including green practices into their business plans, from the pioneers such as Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soap, Patagonia, and Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream to more recent players such as Seventh Generation Paper Products (Seireeni, 2008). These companies are often rewarded with a very devoted clientele and even higher profit margins, demonstrating the triple bottom line of Profits, Environmental Responsibility, and Corporate Social Responsibility (Esty and Winston, 2009). For example, in the manufacturing sector, a 2011 survey by the Material Handling Industry of America (MHIA) found that 90% of manufacturing executives reported that “their companies believe that sustainable initiatives have the potential to both save money and resources” (Shankel, 2011).

At our university as with many others, the Business Department has the highest numbers of matriculating students. Additionally, the Environmental Studies (EVST) Department has been growing rapidly and, for the first time in 2011, it ranked second in numbers of matriculating students. Thus, we felt that a great opportunity presented itself in getting these two departments together and teaching an interdisciplinary course which we titled “Green Business.” Our initial ambition for this course was to place environmental studies and business students in a classroom together and teach them about green business in a context where they could capitalize on each other’s strengths. Our objective was to teach a strongly interdisciplinary course covering both fields of Business and EVST by incorporating innovative ways to teach the students how to include sustainability in business. We have now taught the course twice and, as is often the case, feel that we made improvements in the second go-around.

Innovative teaching was perceived as a necessity. Effective teaching today is by definition innovative, not following traditions but changing course with the class when it seems appropriate to do so (Bain, 2004). Thus, a large proportion of the course consisted of a series of projects including two relatively brief projects and one long-term project that took most of the semester. The semester long local business project is the focus of this article. (For information on the other projects, see the abbreviated syllabus located in the Appendix.)

2. Project Theoretical Grounding

The theoretical grounding for exploring our green business project rests in the literature on service learning and its relationship to managerial skills. Incorporating service learning into business courses provides a number of benefits for students.

Fink (2003) noted that adding a community service component to university courses gives students an opportunity to observe first-hand issues within their own communities and such experiences add a “whole new dimension of quality” to student learning (p. 21). Moreover, Ayas and Mirvis (2005) suggested that service learning in business courses not only helped students connect business and societal issues, but it further enhanced pedagogy by helping students develop self-awareness, an increased understanding of others, and techniques for dealing with issues of diversity. With a new twist on the concept of diversity, we purposely inter-mixed students majoring in business with those majoring in environmental studies. We felt that one of the largest benefits of our service learning project was the opportunity for students to work with others who held different perspectives from their own. We wanted to attack head-on the stereotypes held by students in the two majors that business majors were greedy CEO types and EVST majors were tree-hugging activists. We felt that only by bringing these two groups together, both in the classroom and beyond, could real environmental change occur. By combining knowledge of business concepts with expertise in environmental issues, both majors learned to value the skills brought to the table by their team members.

Additionally, in articulating the advantages of service learning projects, Anderson and Sungur (1999) suggested, among other benefits, that service learning projects (1) provide an active-learning environment that stimulates inquiry-based learning, (2) offer both students and faculty a rewarding experience that benefits the larger community, and (3) promote positive exposure for the university to the community at large. We feel these elements were captured in our green business project as students questioned and assessed local business environmental issues as representatives of the larger university community.

Similarly, Goldstein (2011) cited strong support for active service learning as an alternative pedagogy over traditional lecture. Students retained course information better, expressed greater enjoyment and developed critical thinking skills as a result of service learning. Goldstein (2011) involved students in an active learning service project in which students created instructor resources of lectures and discussions in media psychology. This exercise gave students the opportunity to develop writing, oral presentation, and critical thinking skills in a creative manner (Goldstein, 2011).

In this article, we will explore the pros and cons of our green business term project. In this course, we sent undergraduate business and environmental studies students into the streets to provide them with face-to-face interactions with small businesses in the local area. Our green business project required student teams to contact store owners, persuade them to complete a survey assessing their environmentally-friendly practices, and follow up with recommendations that made sense for the businesses involved. Along the way, students struggled with coordinating their own schedules along with those of busy business owners. They faced obstacles of cost and caring. In some ways, we consider our recent attempt a success because we felt we had improved on the project from our first try a year ago. We still, however, continue to struggle with the issue of translating project learning from the course to the students’ future management skills in ways that are meaningful for students. There are parallels between managing student-led projects and managing in organizations. The question is what are those similarities and how can we best assist students by integrating their project with business concepts? We felt the link between local businesses and university students provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of business struggles beyond the classroom. In this article, we offer our insights into linking our learning goals to management skills; we hope that by sharing our experiences with our colleagues that we can all grow as educators.

3. Course Description

The Green Business course addresses various aspects of sustainability and the opportunities available to businesses and individual consumers to establish green practices. It explores the opportunities that businesses and consumers create, the challenges they encounter, and the ways in which they can contribute toward enhancing long-term environmental sustainability while simultaneously sustaining a profitable business. This course also examines the role of environmental policy, leadership, technological advances, and public opinion in affecting the economics of local businesses and consumers (see abbreviated syllabus in the Appendix).

4. Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

This course aims to develop students’ awareness and skills in the context of green technology, environmental protection, and sustainable development. By the end of the course, students should be able to (1) recognize significant global business and environmental trends and the problems that need solving,

(2) gain an insight into the opportunities offered by environmental, business and socio-political trends for creating sustainable “green” practices, (3) understand the risks and rewards of Green Business projects, (4) prepare a sustainability analysis of a local business. It is the fourth learning objective that is the focus of this article.

5. Course Structure

To best prepare students for their local business project, the course combined readings, lectures, and group assignments. The main text for the course, *The Necessary Revolution* by Senge (2010), provided the background information for students on the current environmental challenges and most importantly, the need for changes in current business practices.

5.1. The Local Business Project

Equal numbers of Business and Environmental Studies students were placed into four and six groups in the two respective years of teaching the course. We felt this was important because it would bring different perspectives from each discipline to problem solving and critical thinking that would be encountered in the project. Each group chose a business sector in which they would identify local businesses, contact as many business owners as possible, and attempt to get them to cooperate in an effort to make their businesses more environmentally sustainable. The business sectors in the first year of the course included bars, clothing shops, apartment complexes, and dentists’ offices. The business sectors, in the second year, were taco shops, pizza shops, coffee shops, auto mechanics, used car lots and dry cleaners. The project was broken into seven sections and linked to specific management skills (see summary Table 1).

Table 1: Project Link to Management Skills

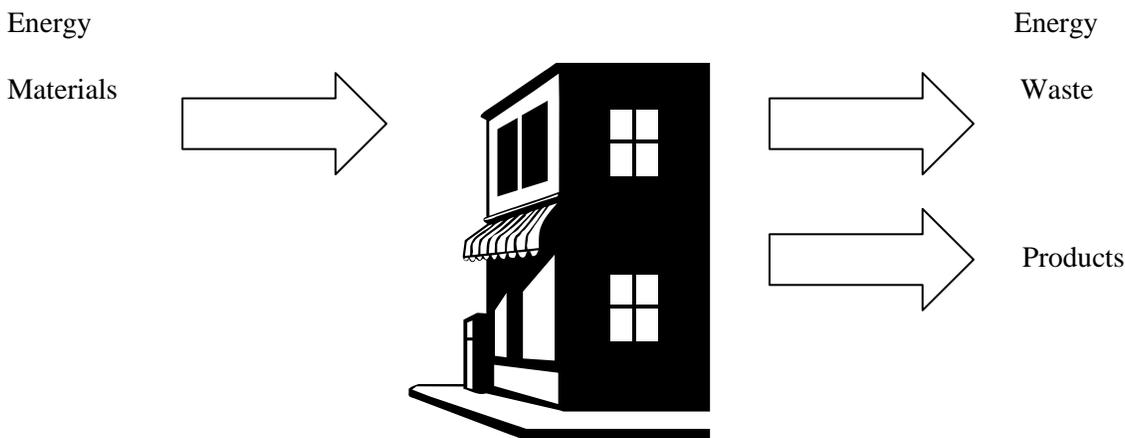
Project Requirements	Management Skills
Write a Business Letter	
	Writing Skills
	Persuasion Tactics
	Taking a Business Perspective
Create a Survey	
	Input/Output Model
	Research Industry Standards
	Develop Measures
Contact Local Businesses	
	Problem Solving
	Time Management and Coordination
	Professional Communication Skills
Conduct Industry Analysis	
	Research Skills
	Recognize Industry Trends
	Examine Overall Market Conditions
Examine Best Practices	
	Research Skills
	Identifying “Green” Standards
	Analyzing Model Businesses
Collect and Analyze Data	
	Manage Spread Sheets
	Collect Evidence
	Support Conclusions with Data
Present Findings	
	Presentation Skills
	Team Coordination
	Propose Solutions to Business Issues

First, the groups of students drafted a letter to business owners that they were to present in person. This letter had to be engaging, persuasive, and to-the-point. To help students understand the basic research and principles of persuasion, we had the students watch and discuss *The Power of Persuasion* by Robert Cialdini (2001). We worked with students through three drafts of the letter.

One of the difficulties we encountered was the students' false perception that businesses would put time and effort into helping them achieve *their* class objectives. We needed to get them to change their perspective and write a letter that was geared towards saving *the business* money and attracting customers through instituting more environmentally sound business practices. This was a time consuming, but necessary process. We hoped that this portion of the project would assist students in the basics of writing a concise business letter, learning to take a business perspective, and incorporating the principles of persuasion into their writing. All of these are necessary skills in the corporate world.

The finalized and vetted letter was accompanied by a survey form of current business practices. Here we used principles of the input/output model to try to anticipate what the individual businesses would be using and generating as inputs and outputs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Input/Output Model



We spent one class period on the input/output model and its application to the groups' particular industry. As you can see from Figure 1, for all businesses, the input is energy and materials. For example, a restaurant uses energy for heating/cooling and appliances. Materials for restaurants include the obvious food products, but also items such as paper goods and cleaning supplies. Outputs for businesses include energy, waste, and products (or services). Again for restaurants, the hot/cold air escapes from the restaurant through doors and cooking vents. Limiting the cost of expended energy can be a real cost saver. There is also waste from uneaten food, paper bags, napkins, plates, plastic utensils, etc. Of course the products/ services that are considered output from any restaurant included the food consumed and the service provided by the staff. Students were challenged to think beyond the obvious inputs and outputs to consider things like how far the produce traveled to get to the restaurant and whether the customers could be enticed to recycle. Through this process, we not only challenged the students to think in terms of inputs and outputs, but they had to consider the best way to measure those components. Additionally, students began to look at industry standards. For example, health standards for restaurants were investigated.

The survey forms created by the students went through three drafts as well. Although the local business project was started just two weeks into the semester, we were 1/3 of the way through the 14 week semester before surveys could begin to go out. Realistically, given availability of managers and owners of the businesses, it took about 1/2 of the semester to get the surveys into the hands of a person qualified to fill it out. In some cases, the owner or manager would fill out the survey when presented; more often students had to make a return trip to the business to pick up the completed survey or have the survey completed by phone. This turned out to be the most difficult component of the project.

Students not only had to coordinate their schedules with their teammates, but with the time available to the business owners. Students also struggled with the lack of interest in the businesses. In many cases, local shops were just trying to keep their heads above water in the current recession. This required the students not only problem solve, but consider communication techniques that were specific to particular businesses.

For example, our garage group was instructed, by us, to dress “business casual” when approaching business owners. After all, they were representing the University. The garage owners mistakenly assumed our students were some sort of government auditors sent to assess their practices such as how they disposed of used car oil. Students were therefore, met with reluctance in discussing *any* business practices. Once the students dressed down, often in university tee shirts, the garage owners were much more open in discussing the practices of their garages.

While the groups waited for results to come in, they set about determining ways for each of the businesses to use more “green” practices in their every-day operations. Many of these practices could also save money for the business and even improve employee satisfaction, improving the triple bottom line (Esty and Winston 2009). For this section of the project, students investigated “best practices” in their industry. This required students to conduct industry research, identify green practices, and analyze various business models. Students were often surprised to find businesses whose commitment to sustainability resonated throughout their organization. For example, one auto dealer in the local area was committed to building a wind turbine on their site for power. This included working with city planners to change regulations that prohibited such structures. This same auto dealer already recycled water, used tires, and all paper products. Such practices were found across industries.

Once the students received the completed surveys, they analyzed the data and were able to compare and contrast practices, especially any environmentally-related practices (or lack thereof), of their particular local business sector. They set up spreadsheets to analyze and track their results. They also selected the most “environmentally friendly” local business in their sector. This was an important step in teaching students to evaluate practices against the measures they had set, weight those measures, and determine which organization ranked highest. For example, is it more “green” to compost unused food or to recycle paper products? As the results played out, this did not turn out to be a big issue as the greenest businesses far outweighed the competition on most of the measures.

The results of the local business project were twofold. First, the students ranked the businesses as to their environmentally friendly practices and presented these results to the class as a group presentation. This required students to coordinate with their classmates on how to clearly and concisely present business results. It also allowed students to practice their oral presentation skills; a skill set often cited by business as particularly important. Second, they made recommendations to each business on how to improve their triple bottom line with an emphasis on becoming more environmentally friendly. Students were required to problem solve with not only “green” solutions but also with solutions that small businesses could afford with an emphasis on a quick return on investment.

This project emphasized experiential learning as the students found the businesses to solicit, went into the business community, collected data, analyzed the data and presented results both to their peers in the classroom and back to the individual businesses. In further cultivating management competencies, our green business project contained specific design conditions found to be relevant for both community and personal learning. Specifically our project contained high skill variety, task identity, and task significance which has been found to increase community learning (Bartel, Saavedra, & Van Dyne, 2001). Students were required to develop surveys, administer those to local business owners, and follow up with those businesses to suggest ways to become more environmentally friendly. The service project required student teams develop task and social interdependence for both the design and implementation of the project. Bartel et al (2001) found interdependence in service projects enhances personal learning for the students involved as they compare and evaluate themselves relative to their other team members. Furthermore, students enrolled in our green business course because environmental issues were of particular interest to them. We capitalized on this interest in our project with the idea of pushing students to develop flexibility, leadership, and self-knowledge as these skills are increasingly required of managers in any field.

6. Course Experience

For the two faculty teaching the course, a Business Professor and an Environmental Studies Professor, it was a challenge to cross disciplinary boundaries. Assumptions about each other’s disciplines had to be overcome. Many of these assumptions were rooted in a lack of knowledge which actually led to learning opportunities for the faculty members.

Teaching students from different disciplines was challenging. One EVST student commented that she would have never taken a course from a business professor, but was glad she had this opportunity to challenge that belief. She felt the course was beneficial in gaining insight into a business perspective.

An additional challenge was that the students had different backgrounds and possessed different proficiency levels in a variety of skills. It is therefore necessary with this type of course, to provide background readings and discussions that will provide a solid knowledge base for the course.

7. Conclusion

We believe that the alternative pedagogy of teaching this course as an active-learning service course was instrumental in translating classroom activities into managerial skills that the students will use in the future. Our experiences suggest that students developed writing skills (survey and questionnaire); they developed better ways of interacting with business managers (found ways to get surveys answered) and they developed skills in oral presentation to a wide variety of audiences. The positive aspects of this active learning and the local business project were learning and demonstrating professional skills that will translate into management skills.

The one negative aspect of the active learning / local business project was the time necessary to devote to the local business project. The project dominated the course and we had to limit some of the other content of the course that would have been valuable. Also students had to deal with issues of equality in group contributions while we struggled with how best to grade the group effort. In the end, we settled on having students take responsibility for specific components of the project. Those were graded individually and averaged with an overall group grade. Overall, we consider the course to be a success. We hope to have the opportunity to teach the course again in the future. This will allow us to further refine the course to emphasize the management skills students can take from the course into their future roles as business and environmental champions.

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Appendix: Abbreviated Course Syllabus - Green Business

Course Description:

This course addresses various aspects of sustainability and the opportunities available to businesses and individual consumers to establish green practices. It explores the opportunities that businesses and consumers create, the challenges they encounter, and the ways in which they can contribute toward enhancing long-term environmental sustainability while simultaneously sustaining a profitable business. This course also examines the role of environmental policy, leadership, technological advances, and public opinion in affecting the economics of local businesses and consumers.

Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

This course aims to develop students' awareness and skills in the context of green technology, environmental protection, and sustainable development.

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Recognize significant global business and environmental trends and the problems that need solving
- Gain an insight into the opportunities offered by environmental, business and socio-political trends for creating sustainable “green” practices
- Understand the risks and rewards of Green Business projects
- Prepare a sustainability analysis of a local business

Textbooks

- Senge, P. et al. (2010). The Necessary Revolution. New York: Doubleday.
 - Chouinard, Y. (2006). Let My People Go Surfing. London: Penguin Books.
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Grading:

In-Class Assignments, Speakers, and Quizzes	25%
Investment Assignment	5%
Energy Debate	10%
Local Business Letter & Survey	5%
Survey Results/Recommendations	10%
Final Portfolio	10%
Oral Presentation	15%
Mid-term Exam	20%
	100%

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the class; What is “green business”?

Cover course objectives, assignments, concepts; Introduction personal accountability
Journaling assignment on individual consumption

Week 2: Framework for Assessment; Green washing

Week 3: Presentation on Green Tech/ Individual consumption; Being a Green Consumer

- Journaling assignment on individual consumption due
- Introduction of Local business project
- Field trip– Grocery shopping
- Field trip– Frontier Project (LEED certified Platinum building)

Week 4: Future Possibilities and Goal Setting

- Discuss future possibilities. This is a good time for imagination and future concepts that are not strictly feasible today.

- Assign local project groups/meet with group to select business to research.
- In class assignment on future possible innovations (without regard to current restraints).
- Journal one feedback and goal setting

Week 5: The Power of Persuasion; Local Business Project

- DVD The Power of Persuasion
- Discuss psychological factors in getting businesses/people to change to more green habits
- Student role-play on persuasion tactics for Local Businesses
- Assign students draft letter to businesses
- Discuss rubric design
- Discuss tragedy of the commons

Week 6 Company Case Study; Local business Project

- Examine the need for a leader with a vision for the company to really become a green business.
- Discuss Case Study
- Discussion on Organizational Change/Survey Construction
- Meet individually with groups

Mid-term Exam

Week 7 Fair Trade/Fair Profit; Local business Project

- Discuss psychological factors in getting businesses/people to change to more green habits
- Discuss Fair trade/Fair Profit
- Draft of rubric due for Local Business Project Due
- Second draft of letters for the Local Business Project Due

Week 8 Over-consumption; Local business Project

- Final letter to specific Redlands businesses due (need response in 1 week)
- Students give letters to their specific Redlands businesses

Week 9 Local Business Project /Student directed

- Journal Exercise 2 assigned
- Consumption web site exercise
- Follow up with Local Businesses
- Collect local business survey results

Week 10 Local business Project; Energy

- Journal Exercise 2 Due
- Begin to analyze results
- Begin preparation for local business proposals

Week 11 Energy Debate; Local business Project

- Continue work on Local Business Project
- Students will debate energy future
- Assign Investment Paper

Week 12 Green Practices

- Students turn in draft of suggestions to the businesses involved in the Local Business Project.
- Investment assignment due
- Discussion of Journaling exercise #2 results
- Students should discuss personal goals on sustainability.

Week 13 Local Business Projects

- Individual Group Meetings with Professors (Discussion and revisions of projects)
- Continue work on Local Business Project

- Journaling results comparison writing exercise due
- Final letters back to local businesses with recommendations due
- Discuss Let My People Go Surfing and what it means to a business to have green practices

Week 14 Local Business Projects

- Presentations of Local Business Projects
- Discussion and revisions of projects
- Follow up with local organizations

Mon: 12/13 Last Day of Class: Topic: Company Research Projects

- Wrap-up of Course
- Evaluations
- Turn in final Company Research Project

Course Project Outlines

Projects:

1. Energy Policy Debate

- ❖ Read energy policy information from the Bush administration, UCS and the Obama Administration
- ❖ Assign students to represent either the Bush policies or the Obama policies
- ❖ Have students debate the appropriate energy future for the United States

2. Investment Project

- ❖ Students are given (imaginary) \$10,000 to invest in energy stocks
- ❖ Students are given 5-7 categories of energy types to choose from; they rank categories as to which they would like to invest in most
- ❖ Each student is paired with someone that has like interests in our energy future
- ❖ Student teams research specific publically traded energy companies in which to invest their money
- ❖ Students invest their \$10,00 in at least three publically traded energy companies
- ❖ Each team presents (both orally and in written format) a ranking of energy types to invest in and the specific companies they would invest in with data supporting their decisions

3. Local business Project:

- ❖ Assign groups and industries
- ❖ Students pick a particular local business to study in depth
- ❖ Send out introduction letters to various local organizations
- ❖ Have students write a survey on green business practices
- ❖ Send out survey to participating businesses
- ❖ Students interview and observe at a local business
- ❖ Students compile survey results
- ❖ Students send out recommendations to the businesses involved with the project