



Representing ESD in the Humanities

Mai Zaki¹, Jessica March¹, Raja Bahloul¹ and Haya Almansoori¹

Abstract

This paper describes a case study where Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) principles were applied to a design of an Arabic Heritage course. This case study is particularly important as it showcases the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the humanities domain, a hugely under-represented field when it comes to the implementation of sustainability in teaching. The paper describes the learning design process including targeting the key competencies and learning domains, in addition to highlighting the five different SDGs which have been integrated in the course. The paper also outlines some of the challenges encountered in the redesign process.

Keywords

humanities, education for sustainable development, learning design, teaching, education

Resumen

Este documento describe un estudio de caso en el que se aplicaron los principios de Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible (EDS) en el diseño de un curso de Patrimonio Árabe. Este estudio de caso es particularmente importante ya que muestra la integración de los ODS en el ámbito de las humanidades, un campo muy poco representado cuando se trata de la implementación de la sostenibilidad en la enseñanza. El documento describe el proceso de diseño de aprendizaje, incluyendo la identificación de las competencias clave y los dominios de aprendizaje, además de destacar los cinco diferentes ODS que se han integrado en el curso. El documento también describe algunos de los desafíos encontrados en el proceso de rediseño.

Palabras clave

humanidades, educación para el desarrollo sostenible, diseño de aprendizaje, enseñanza, educación

¹ American University of Sharjah, UAE

Corresponding Author:

Mai Zaki, Department of Arabic and Translation Studies, American University of Sharjah, University City, Sharjah, PO Box 26666, UAE

Email: mzaki@aus.edu

Part 1. The learning design

Introduction

The learning design was created by: Mai Zaki, Jessica March, Raja Mallek Bahloul and Haya Al-Mansoori, a team from the American University in Sharjah, UAE. The discipline of the chosen course is humanities, and the 3-credit-hour course is “Introduction to Arabic Heritage II”, which is typically taken by freshman and sophomore students. Classes are 75 minutes per class, twice a week over a period of 15 weeks (one semester).

The course is the second in a two-series of introductory required courses for all students at the university, taught in both English and Arabic. The redesigned module presented here constitutes the first 20 hours of teaching and learning of what would be a 45-hour course. The course introduces the intellectual, literary, artistic, and cultural contributions of the Arabs to world civilization from the post-Abbasid era (mid-13th century) to the early 20th century. This is a general education course provided by the department of Arabic and Translation studies that is largely history-based but aims to give students a broad overview of the historical development of the Arab/Islamic civilisation in various aspects, including the language, the political systems, the religious movements, and the scientific contributions.

The English version of the course has been recently redesigned to be module-based, i.e. to consist of 6 individual modules which are chronologically ordered. Therefore, throughout the course, students are introduced to several key concepts in each module, including the concepts of Arabic language and identity, the development of Islamic dynasties, Muslim rule in Spain and the Arab/Islamic contributions in science. Pedagogically, the course is largely text-based and has been traditionally taught in lecture-style classes where the teacher is in control. Support is available to students through the teacher’s office hours, in addition to the university academic support centre. However, one of the main objectives of the redesign process was to make the learning experience in this course more interactive and student-centred in alignment with the principles of ESD.

The learning outcomes of the whole course (45 teaching hours) are as follows:

1. Define ‘*turath*’ (Arabic heritage), explain its relationship to the Arabic language and identity, and the ways in which it has been disseminated from the 13th till the 19th century.
2. Explain the various periods of the history of Arabic- Islamic civilization (from the post-Abbasid up to the early modern period).
3. Analyze various genres of post-Abbasid and early- modern (revivalist) Arabic writing.
4. Assess the significant contributions of the post-Abbasid Arab and Muslim scholars to world civilization.

Integrating the ESD model

In the process of redesign, the aim was to achieve the specific learning outcomes in alignment with the principles of ESD. For example, learners show the ability to understand and reflect on the norms and values that underlie one’s actions. The learner appreciates the historical value of Arab-Islamic civilisation heritage while considering the linguistic and cultural diversity leading to a shared sense of humankind. Also, for LO4, the re-designed module aims to raise learners’ awareness about the Arab/Muslim scientists’

contributions in a way that brings them to understand the intrinsic value of education and relate it to the challenges facing education in the Arab world today. Therefore, learners would work collaboratively to identify the key concepts while assessing issues such as gender (in)equality, and their role in empowering the Arabs to build and expand their civilisation within a balanced view of Islamic history.

Typically, the original course utilised formative and summative assessment tools in the form of quizzes and exams with limited question types (multiple choice and true/false).. However, in the re-designed module, a variety of assessment tools were introduced, including various graded activities in the form of productive work such as timelines, maps, brochures, infographics, role play, and essay tasks. Active individual and group class participation is measured through Padlet contributions, which integrate online technological tools into the classroom. Padlet is a collaborative web-based digital wall where collaborators can be guided to share images, comments, video and audio files in response to a given prompt. Finally, at the end of each module, students are assessed through an online exam on Blackboard Learning Management System (the university's software application for delivery of educational courses and materials) using different question types.

As far as the key competencies for sustainability are concerned, using the CoDesignS ESD Toolkit (CoDesignS ESD, 2023), Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the breakdown of the competencies addressed. "Ways of Thinking" were the most targeted competencies for sustainability in our design. Through activities related to the development of the Arabic language and its relation to Arab identity or creating a timeline tracing the historical development of various Islamic empires, students are practising Systems thinking; while activities such as analysing a mind map of concepts relevant to the Muslim presence and contributions in Muslim Spain, students get to practise critical thinking and reflect on the values which guided this presence and perceptions of the other.

"Ways of Being" were also an important component here as students are encouraged to reflect on the role of Arab/Muslims in various stages of history and to continually evaluate their political, religious, and scientific contributions to the societies then and now. For example, one of the activities targeting the Self-awareness competency tasked the students with creating a role-play video highlighting the achievements of Arab scientists.

Other competencies that were targeted to a lesser degree in the design included Problem-solving, Normative competency, and Future thinking. Although Collaboration competency appears to be very low in the initial design, in practice more activities required collaboration. This will be taken into consideration in future iterations of the course.

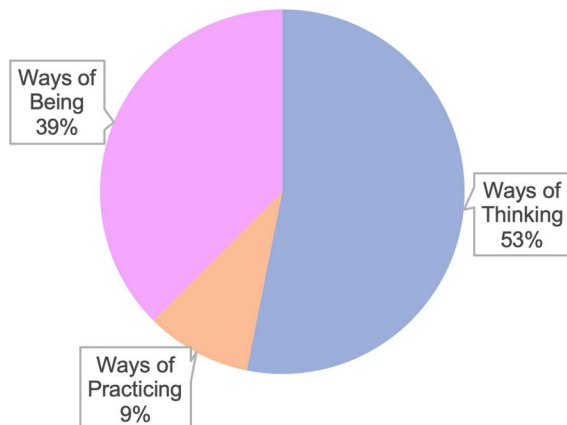


Figure 1. Competencies for sustainability (1) - CoDesignS ESD (2021)

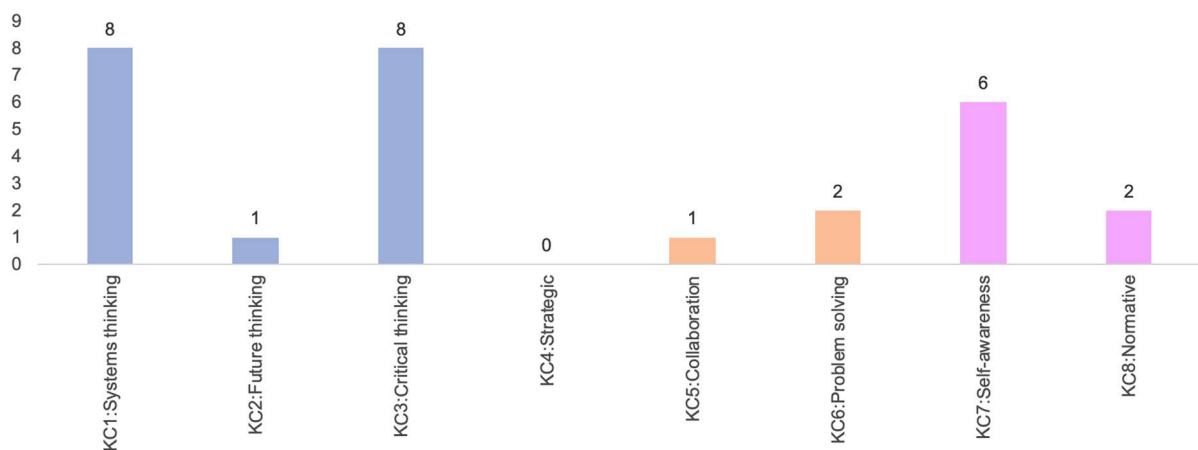


Figure 2. Competencies for sustainability (2) - CoDesignS ESD (2021)

The specific learning domains which were targeted in this redesigned module are illustrated in Figure 3 using the CoDesignS ESD Toolkit (CoDesignS ESD, 2021). These learning activities map to some of the learning outcomes (stated previously) of the 45-hour course. Due to the nature of the course, the cognitive domain is utilised the most, but following the principles of ESD helped in targeting the other domains as well.

(A) The Mind

- 1) Recognize the different stages of the historical development of the Arab/Islamic civilization.
- 2) Analyse the role played by the different variables of the Arab identity and the development of the Arabic language as well as the challenges it faces.
- 3) Recognize the historical roots of the Muslim presence in Spain and the change in their identity from the 13th till the 16th centuries.

(B) The Heart

- 1) Reflect on the importance of historical eras to Islamic civilization and on factors that promote or hinder gender equality among Arab scientists in writing and video tasks.
- 2) Collaborate in groups to create a brochure based on Alhambra and an informatic -map of Spain visualising cultural heritage patterns.
- 3) Participate in group discussions about the changes in Arab identity and language overtime.

(C) The Hand

- 1) Apply knowledge of the historical development of Arab civilization and its contribution to science through role play and timelines.
- 2) Evaluate the various Arab language challenges and identity variables using the 'axes of identity' framework as an indicator to compare different linguistic or cultural groups.

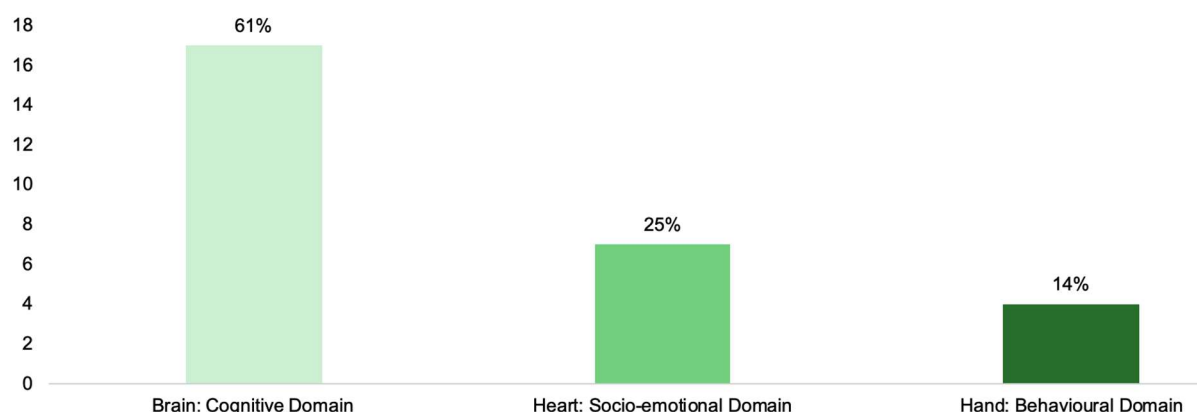


Figure 3. Specific learning domains - CoDesignS ESD (2021)

The course redesign has targeted 5 SDGs as follows:

- SDG 4 Quality education: the learner explains how inequalities in terms of access to education and opportunities for lifelong learning existed in different periods of Islamic civilisation. (A1, A2, B1)
- SDG 5 Gender equality: the learner explains how gender inequality impacted scientific contributions of Arab/Muslim scientists in different periods of Islamic history. (B1)
- SDG 10 Reduced inequalities: the learner explains how to recognize the problematic consequences of inequalities (political, economic, cultural, etc.) through specific periods of Islamic history and knows how to use the axis of identity framework to explain variables of identity. (A2) and (C1)
- SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities: through analysis of identity variables during various periods of Arabic history, the learner demonstrates how to develop their own interpretation of the different levels of shaping identity and

understands how the negotiation of identity variables changes and adapts throughout history. (A2)

- SDG 16 Peace Justice and Strong Institutions: the learner is able to reflect on their own personal belonging to diverse linguistic/cultural groups and how the historical struggle of “us vs the other” developed in the Arab world within the general theme of shared humanity and justice. (A3, C1, C2)

Finally, as Figure 4 shows (CoDesignS ESD, 2023), there were a variety of tools used in the design, including documents, infographics, and webinars. However, the most used tool is Forum, which was introduced to encourage interactive and engaging discussions amongst the students who worked either individually, in pairs or in groups. These discussions can be student-led, but in some cases the teacher could assign topics/points of view to specific groups. Other tools included the creation of role-play and informative videos, as well as competitive class quizzes.

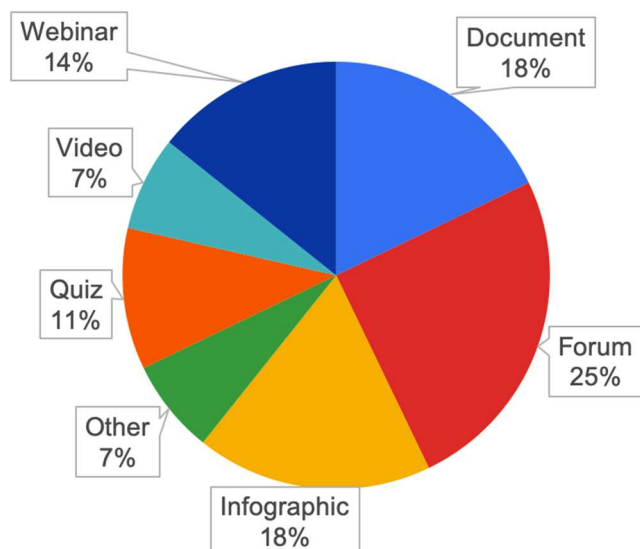


Figure 4. Tools used in the design - CoDesignS ESD (2021)

In terms of activity types, the figure shows a balanced distribution of various types utilised in the course. The production activities had the biggest share (30%), followed by activities related to communication/collaboration (23%). In a text-based history course, we are particularly proud of these two types of activities which are not typically associated with this content. The least used activity type was practice (8%) as the nature of the course does not lend itself easily to this type.

Part 2. The process we used to arrive at the design

Teamwork and challenges

All team members worked on the design. Mai Zaki, associate professor at the Department of Arabic and Translation Studies, was the lead academic advisor as she has a significant number of years teaching this course. Jessica March, director of the Achievement Academy Bridge Program, is an experienced academic and played a key role in developing the redesign process. Raja Mallek Bahloul, senior Instructor and level coordinator, was

the educational technologist as she is certified in course redesign. Finally, Haya Al-Mansoori, a senior student, was the student contributor who was familiar with the course and represented the student perspective at every stage.

The bulk of the work was done during regular meetings held before each assignment. During the meeting we always had constructive discussions after which tasks were delineated. In the more advanced stages of the bootcamp, we would meet first as a team, discuss core topics, distribute assignments, and continue the smaller tasks via email. Following the CoDesign ESD framework (ALDESD, 2023; CoDesignS ESD, 2023.) materials throughout the process, we would meet regularly with our mentors for feedback. We adopted a flexible model of work supported by a collective interest in the ESD model and willingness to achieve the tasks at our best capabilities.

The pattern of work the team adopted was instrumental in the success of the process. We adhered to the deadlines by planning our initial and subsequent meetings carefully. Using Google products allowed us to work simultaneously and collaboratively on the same document. As a team, we had complementary skill sets which we used well. Another major factor in the success of our collective work is the constructive feedback we received from the mentors every step of the way.

We encountered a number of challenges during the design process. First, it was difficult to find a starting point for the module redesign. However, our mentors played a key role in guiding us to find a takeoff point in the course objectives. In fact, our brainstorming sessions, held through the online tool Miro, were quite productive in generating ideas and sharing them with our mentors who were able to give us immediate feedback. Once we found that point, things became easier. Second, we found it at times extremely difficult to integrate the various activity types given the nature of our course. Since it is a humanities course, unsurprisingly it is content heavy in theory and historical facts that would normally fall more within the 'exploration' types of activities which would tie in well with the 'ways of thinking' key competencies targeting the cognitive domain of learning. This challenge brought the team together to rethink the activity types, thus adding more 'ways of practising' and 'ways of being' types of activities. Therefore, we managed to add 'hand' and 'heart' specific learning objectives to achieve "transformative sustainability" as Sippos et al. (2008) argue. Finally, time limitation was another challenge in the process given our various work commitments.

Reflections and the road ahead

The ARA 102 course was an existing course when we commenced the redesign process, so the new design was partially implemented during the bootcamp, and it was rolled out the following semester. In the initial proposal for the redesign, we had identified that there was scope to scale the delivery of this course in its new form. However, since it is a multi-section course taught by several instructors at the department, the implementation of the new design needs collective effort and a shared commitment to the aims of the ESD model. The knowledge gained from participation in the Bootcamp and the redesign has enabled us to apply the principles to course design projects in different programs. It is truly cross-disciplinary and can be applied to all courses in the university. Two of the team members are looking to revise the syllabi and course outlines of Achievement Academy English language courses to reflect alignment with the ESD principles.

There are a number of existing protocols in place to facilitate evaluation of the design. Students' course evaluations which are collected from weeks 12 to 15 in the semester provide single point feedback after the course grades are submitted. This feedback is submitted anonymously and requires respondents to give numerical responses to feedback prompts as well as extended comments. The instructor/professor reflects on the feedback given by the learners and this window for reflection naturally enables the designer to identify the successful aspects of the course and the areas for improvement. Below are samples from students' feedback on the newly-designed course as they highlight the students' appreciation of the interactive approach and practical class activities as well as the use of online tools:

I also really liked how Prof. May Zaki made the class interactive and gave us a lot of activities to engage all of us in the course. She came up with creative ways to make the topic interesting.

I like the practical part. It feels good to solve real problems with knowledge you just learnt.

The course overall was interesting and was taught in a great way. Loved the interactive texts, padlets, infographic assessment and the video assessment.

The professor taught the course in a different creative way rather than the old boring memorizing method and that stimulated my interest in the course and helped me learn more.

Another tool for measuring the design, is the assessment of the students' performance in meeting the learning outcomes which occurs throughout the course in graded coursework and module assessments. For example, participation rate in the interactive class work was very high, and over 80% of students achieved grades of B or higher in tasks such as creating infographics, videos, etc.

To ensure ongoing, more immediate and less formal feedback, it is possible to gauge the pulse of the learners via regular surveys or poll systems based on each module/unit. This would provide multi-point feedback through spontaneous responses to track the 'mood' in response to the learning throughout the semester. The combination of all of these feedback and observational tools would provide a very detailed evaluation of the design.

Considerations for successful implementation

The timeline for achieving the SDGs by 2030 is short and the ideal scenario would be to scale the redesign within the university and in other academic settings. This is one of the motivating factors for all members of the redesign team when presenting our experiences in conferences. This platform gives us the opportunity to encourage and motivate other educators to embrace the ESD principles, especially in the field of humanities. In collaboration with the university's Centre for innovation in Teaching and Learning, we hope to offer interdisciplinary support to colleagues who would like to use ESD in their course design; thus being part of the waves of change (Toro-Troconis et al. 2023)

As educators we seek to create teachable moments, held together cohesively within the parameters of the syllabus and curriculum, that will lead our students to achieving their

course learning outcomes in an enjoyable and enriching way. Participation in this Bootcamp enabled us to see that we already possessed a lot of background in core education design (after many years of experience in the field), but what was required of us was a paradigm shift which nudged us to reconstruct our courses with the core focus on the sustainable development goals, the learning domains, activity types as well as the learning outcomes.

From the academic staff perspective, driven by a shared interest in ESD, this project was the catalyst to a professional collaboration between colleagues and our student participant. We all had heavy workloads and family commitments, but we prioritised our meetings and assignments for the Bootcamp because we shared a sense of pride in having our proposal accepted, and in representing humanities in an otherwise science-dominated field. This project was not only about delivering on the final assignments, it also placed emphasis on the collaborative and iterative process. One of our main take-aways as a team was the appreciation of the importance of sharing ideas and supporting each other; breaking down silos. Moreover, as a team, we realised that the experience of working with the toolkit provided an invaluable opportunity to view the course design from a different angle- somewhat of a bird's eye view on the course. This holistic view, which can be easily forgotten under the pressures of day-to-day teaching, is both necessary and beneficial in the process of self-assessment as academics.

The experience of having a student in the team was an invaluable mutual asset. From the student's perspective, the skills and knowledge that she learned through the process of integrating the principles of ESD are transferable in any future career. Having her voice heard and honing her critical thinking skills while understanding the teacher's perspective on the whole process of teaching and learning was not only an eye opener for a young student but an opportunity for growth. On the other hand, for the faculty members in the team, it was very beneficial to hear first-hand the students' representative opinion on the design of teaching activities to be able to create a truly student-centred learning experience.

For others who are embarking on the same path, we would highly recommend the experience which was informative, unifying, global and social. The whole process scaffolded the learning and built confidence in the design team; and created a community of practice among the different teams in the bootcamp. We identified that we wanted to be part of the change needed in Higher Education (Cotton et al. 2010); as some administrative systems are slow to respond and can be resistant to change. We had an excellent opportunity to seize the institutional vision to prioritise sustainability as a key pillar in the university's strategic plan. This support at an institutional level made our participation beneficial. It would be prudent to ensure that this institutional support is secured before commencing on this process.

We believe that having institutional buy-in and vision which is tied closely to the strategic plan and the key performance indicators is critical to the scaling of this activity. The institution is central to the promotion of upskilling, training, awareness raising and cultivating the context for positive change. A strong recommendation to others is that initial dialogue with the institution, or Ministry of (Higher) Education, is prioritised before commencing the activities. Without this kind of support, amplifying these activities could be a slow and frustrating process. If possible, it would be valuable to lobby accrediting bodies to require inclusion of ESD in courses which they approve.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank our mentors, Vanessa McCorquodale and Igor Curiel, for their valuable guidance throughout the design process.

References

- ALDESD (2023). *CoDesignS ESD Framework*. Association for Learning Design and Education for Sustainable Development. <https://codesignsesd.org/toolkit/>
- ALDESD (2023). *Learning Design and ESD Bootcamp*. <https://aldesd.org/bootcamp-2023/>
- CoDesignS ESD (2021). *CoDesignS ESD Framework and Toolkit*. <https://codesignsesd.org/>
- Cotton, D., & Winter, J. (2010). It's not just bits of paper and light bulbs: A review of sustainability pedagogies and their potential for use in higher education. *Sustainability Education: Perspectives and Practice Across Higher Education*. 39-54.
- Sippos, Y., Battisti, B., & Grimm, K. (2008). Achieving transformative sustainability learning: Engaging heads, hands and heart. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 9(1), 68-86.
- Toro-Troconis, M., Inzolia, Y., & Ahmad, N. (2023). Exploring Attitudes towards Embedding Education for Sustainable Development in Curriculum Design. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 12(4), 42-54. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v12n4p42>
- UNESCO IESALC (2022, July 1). Bootcamp de Educación para el Desarrollo Sostenible formó a equipos de 21 universidades en pedagogías transformadoras para incluir ODS en los currículos. *UNESCO IESALC Blog*. <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/2022/07/01/bootcamp-de-educacion-para-el-desarrollo-sostenible-formo-a-equipos-de-21-universidades-en-pedagogias-transformadoras-para-incluir-ods-en-los-curriculos/>