

Sustainability Project for Environmental Ethics

In the Fall of 2014 I taught an environmental ethics course wherein students were introduced to competing ideas and theories within the field of environmental ethics. Toward the end of the semester we sought to apply different competing theories toward real-world environmental problems. For their final project, groups of 3-4 students were asked to select one pressing environmental concern, investigate it, consider it through the lens of some of our competing ethical theories, and suggest how, with the theories in mind, we should best address the problem. The array of topics was strong. One group presented on landfill management, another on the present and future of battery-powered cars, another on water pollution, factory farms, etc.

On the plus side, the students learned a lot in both researching their presentation and learning from others. However, the presentations typically over-emphasized the factual content of the issue and under-emphasized the philosophical disputes. Both elements were present, but not in the ratio I would have preferred. Their grade was based on the quality of their research, the quality of their presentation (basic presentation skills – see attached rubric) and the philosophical substance with which they engaged the problem.

It is an excellent project idea. However, I think students need to be reminded more frequently and prior to the presentations to focus largely on the philosophical questions raised by the issue they are pursuing.

Environmental Ethics Presentation Rubric

Presentation (40 points possible)

Body language: 5 6 7 8 9 10
Maintains eye contact with audience, doesn't move around too much or too little, appears confident and comfortable, has clearly rehearsed their presentation.

Speech: 5 6 7 8 9 10
Speaks slowly and clearly, links ideas, doesn't lose audience. Is mindful of time.

Visual aids: 5 6 7 8 9 10
Keeps audience attention and understanding with a visual aid of some kind (e.g. Power Point). The visual aid genuinely helps the audience to follow your argument.

Presentation of ideas 5 6 7 8 9 10
You work through your ideas in a clear and orderly manner. You dig deep below the surface to insure that your ideas are informed, well thought-out, and progressively build toward your thesis.

Content (60 points possible)

Topic 5 6 7 8 9 10
You have chosen a topic and a thesis that reflect some aspect of our course and that has the potential to improve the overall health of our environment. Your topic is narrow, appropriate, and unique. You quickly introduce your topic and thesis.

Explicit and controversial thesis 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your thesis is controversial and presented clearly. It is a definite stand on one side of a controversial issue. I am genuinely curious to see how you will defend it.

Creativity 5 6 7 8 9 10
Your ideas are original and creative. You have clearly thought hard about the matter and have worked to find your own perspective on it. Your ideas and approach to expressing them are genuinely interesting.

Roadmap 5 6 7 8 9 10
You let us know what you will argue and how you will argue for it. You give a quick roadmap at the beginning and you review this roadmap at the end.

Research 5 6 7 8 9 10
You have researched your idea well. You have drawn from course materials, but you have also sought and been informed by outside sources. You also properly cite these sources in your presentation. It is clear where these ideas leave off and your ideas begin.

Quality of argument 5 6 7 8 9 10
You present an actual argument, it is your own, and it is somewhat persuasive. When you are concluding your presentation I am either nearly convinced of the truth of your claim or I have a question or two regarding some detail.

Grade: _____