

Comments on “The Lifestyle Project”

Dexter Perkins

Department of Geology and Geological Engineering, University of North Dakota,
Grand Forks, ND 58202-8358

As an Associate Editor for the Journal of Geoscience Education, my main duty is to handle manuscripts as they go through the review process. This means I read them carefully and select appropriate reviewers. It also means that I get to see them before publication.

One of the most exciting manuscripts published in 2003 was “The Lifestyle Project” by Karin Kirk and John Thomas. I found it so intriguing that, even before the review process was finished, I had adapted it for use in my “Introduction to Environmental Issues” class. According to the authors, the Lifestyle Project is a three week project that provides “a way for students to learn about environmental alternatives by modifying their own lifestyles.” It does this very well and was, for nineteen students, one of the most significant learning experiences of the semester.

The project begins with a quiz that allows students to get a sense of how environmentally aware they are, and what the impacts of their lifestyles are on the environment. Such quizzes have appeared in many green publications before. The model quiz used by Kirk and Thomas, which requires some fine tuning to make it appropriate in different settings, emphasizes things that students do or see every day. For example, one question is “How many hours do you ride in a car each day?” The quiz took about fifteen minutes to complete; students scored themselves using a rubric I provided. Students then posted their scores on a huge histogram we put on the blackboard so they could see how they compared with each other. We then spent the next two class periods discussing the results. I had trouble ending the discussion because the students were amazed to find out how much they took for granted and what the consequences of some of their daily habits were.

Subsequently, I offered the students the chance to follow through with the second part of the Lifestyles Project: they could undertake a 3-4 week project involving making significant changes in their daily routine and analyzing the results. All exams, papers, and everything

else in my Environmental Issues class are optional, so the Lifestyles Project fit in nicely by giving students additional options for earning credit. At the end of the projects, students turned in a journal reporting daily events and reactions and a summary essay describing how the project would affect them in the future.

Kirk and Thomas suggest projects involving turning down thermostats, trying to go through days without producing any garbage that goes to a landfill, reducing use of electricity and water, not driving anywhere, eating efficiently (moving toward vegetarianism). I added a few more options. In the end, nineteen of the eighty-five students in the class completed one or more of the options. The most popular choices were turning down the thermostat and moving toward a vegetarian diet.

The results were better than I could imagine. The journals were excellent and fun to read. Every student but one said the project was extremely valuable and would lead to permanent changes in their lives. Some said they were embarrassed when they realized how ignorant and lazy they were. Most said it should be a requirement for the Environmental Issues class.

Toward the end of the project I overheard two students talking about the project: one, who had pursued the vegetarian option, said to the other “my roommate and friends weren’t very helpful at times . . . they tried to get me to eat meat and told me the teacher would never find out. I told them that this project was not for the professor. It was for me.”

The Lifestyle Project is indeed a project for the participants and I strongly recommend it. If you don’t teach an appropriate class, consider creating one. The Lifestyles Project gets students excited, involved and thinking in ways difficult to achieve otherwise. It will make them better citizens and could have long lasting effects.