Learning-by-doing: experience from 20 years of teaching LCA to future engineers

Purpose: In support of the sustainable development of our societies, future engineers should have elementary knowledge in sustainability assessment and use of life cycle assessment. Publications on pedagogical experience with teaching life cycle assessment (LCA) in high-level education are however scarce. Here, we describe and discuss 20 years of experience in teaching LCA at MSc level in an engineering university with the ambition to share our insights and inspire teaching of LCA as part of a university curriculum. Methods: We detail the design of an LCA course taught at the Technical University of Denmark since 1997. The course structure relies on (i) a structured combination of theoretical teaching, practical assignments and hands-on practice on LCA case studies, and (ii) the conduct of real-life LCA case studies in collaboration with companies or other organisations. Through the semester-long duration of the course, students from different engineering backgrounds perform full-fledged LCA studies in groups, passing through two iterations—a screening LCA supporting a more targeted LCA. Results and discussion: The course design, which relies on a learning-by-doing principle, is transparently described to inspire LCA teachers among the readers. Historical evolution and statistics about the course, including its 192 case studies run in collaboration with 105 companies and institutions, are analysed and serve as basis to discuss the benefits and challenges of its different components, such as the theory acquisition, the assignment work, the LCA software learning, the conduct of case studies, the merits of industrial collaborations and grading approaches. Conclusions: We demonstrate the win-win situation created by the setting of the course, in which the students are actively engaged and learn efficiently how to perform an LCA while the collaborating companies often get useful insights into their analysed case studies. The course can also be an eye opener for companies unfamiliar with LCA, who get introduced to life cycle thinking and the potential benefits of LCA. We have no hesitation in recommending industries and LCA teachers to engage into such collaborations even in the fundamental teaching of LCA techniques.