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Abstract

The Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD): a method of teaching ethical questions of sustainable development

Business enterprises are increasingly regarded as key actors of sustainable development. The development towards sustainable business is even more fostered by the spreading of business rankings based on corporate sustainability indexes, which assess the overall sustainable performance. But despite these trends the awareness of the necessary sustainability shift within business enterprises is rather moderate. At least to some extent this can be explained by the lack of instruments to teach sustainable development in business schools and in advanced business training. This holds especially true for the ethical questions of sustainability. This is amazing since the concept of sustainable development is strongly bound to moral principles (e.g. social justice, dignity of man, human rights, ethical concepts of a good life and of solidarity). Relying on these implicit principles sustainability indexes demand for sustainable products and services, for ecological management, for social reporting, for codes of conduct for suppliers, for equal rights and non-discrimination etc. Consequently some business enterprises have started to establish corporate value management to cope with theses challenges. Taking the ethical demands for sustainable corporate performance serious practising and teaching sustainability has to comprise ethical reflections on the relevant moral ideas for sustainable development, too. Thus this paper wants to put forward neo-Socratic dialogue (NSD) as a didactic method to teach fundamental ethical questions of sustainable development for business enterprises.

A NSD is an inquiry into ideas, originally meant to find consensus on some topic through a joint deliberation and weighing-up of arguments. The dialogue aims at visioning, explaining values and clarifying fundamental concepts. It implies a systematic investigation of our assumptions, reasons and viewpoints, and a cooperative testing of their validity. In the dialogue participants attempt to formulate legitimate principles and develop a shared and inspiring perspective.

A second aim of the NSD is to learn to have a dialogue instead of a discussion. This requires adequate command of a number of dialogical roles, skills and attitudes, especially suspending judgements and keeping a balance between taking position and resigning. Both aims are intimately connected to the development of strategy, organisational learning and knowledge management.

The NSD has been successfully applied so far in medical ethics, university teaching, organisational learning, business ethics, as well as in primary education.

A NSD is focussed on a single fundamental ethical question. A NSD is applied to a concrete experience of one of the participants that is accessible to all other participants. Systematic reflection upon this experience is accompanied by a search for shared judgments and underlying reasons for these. In the case of sustainable development examples for such fundamental questions are the following:

- What does it mean to conduct a good life?
- Is luxury unnecessary?
- What does participation in the context of business enterprises mean?
- How can business enterprises realize solidarity?

What is basically Socratic in the NSD is the method of rigorous inquiry into the thoughts, concepts and values we hold as true. The NSD is a joint investigation into the assumptions we make when we formulate our thoughts.

The proposed paper will give an overview on this method and its application for teaching ethical questions of sustainable development. The article will elaborate especially the business applications of NSD to teach sustainability. Besides describing the more theoretical background of NSD, the paper will present a case study of a NSD held with an interdisciplinary group of students studying sustainable development at the University of Vienna.

Revised manuscript: Contribution to Chris Galea (ed): Teaching Business Sustainability

The Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD): A Method of Teaching the Ethics of Sustainable Development

1. Introduction: Sustainability, Ethics and Corporations

Business enterprises are increasingly regarded as key actors in relation to sustainable development. Development towards sustainable business is fostered by the dissemination of business rankings based on corporate sustainability indeces, which assess the corporation's overall sustainability performance. But despite these trends the necessary shift of awareness of sustainability within business enterprises is rather moderate. At least to some extent this can be explained by the lack of instruments to teach sustainable development in business schools and in advanced business training. This holds true especially for the ethics of sustainability. This is surprising since the concept of sustainable development is strongly bound to moral principles (e.g. social justice, dignity of man, human rights, ethical concepts of a good life and of solidarity; Pepper 1996, Littig 2001). Relying on these implicit principles sustainability indeces demand sustainable products and services, ecological management, social and ecological reporting, codes of conduct, equal rights of men and women, and non-discrimination etc. Consequently some business enterprises have started to establish sustainability reporting and corporate value management (Kitson/Campbel 1996, Wieland 2001) to cope with theses challenges.[1] Taking the ethical demands for sustainable corporate performance seriously, practising and teaching sustainability has to comprise ethical reflections on the relevant moral ideas of sustainable development. Thus this paper wants to put forward Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD) as a didactic method to communicate fundamental ethical questions about sustainable development in business training and enterprises. Furthermore it will give an overview on this method and its application for teaching the ethics of sustainable development. Besides describing the conceptional background of the NSD, the paper will present a case

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[1] See for example: www.globalreporting.org, www.corporateregister.com, www.sustainability-reports.com

study of a NSD conducted with an interdisciplinary group of students at the University of Vienna.

2. What is a Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD)?

A NSD is an inquiry into ideas, meant to find consensus on some topic through a joint deliberation and weighing-up of arguments. The dialogue aims at visioning, explaining values, and clarifying fundamental concepts. It implies a systematic investigation of our assumptions, reasons and viewpoints, and a cooperative testing of their validity. In the dialogue participants attempt to formulate legitimate principles and develop a shared and inspiring perspective (Nelson 1922, 1965, Heckmann 1993). Participants do not need a specialized or expert knowledge of the question at stake.

A second aim of the NSD is to improve the dialogical capabilities of the participants. This requires adequate command of a number of dialogical roles, skills and attitudes, especially suspending judgements and keeping a balance between taking a position and not doing so. Both aims are intimately connected to the development of strategy, organisational learning and knowledge management.[2]

A NSD is focussed on a single fundamental (ethical or philosophical) question. This question should concern basic, essential matters. It should be non-empirical, i.e. answerable purely by thinking. It must be formulated in a plain and simple way (not piling up complicated concepts). For the participants something should be at stake in searching for an answer, the question needs to be an urgent one. It must be possible for the participants to find examples from their own experience in which the question plays a central role.

A NSD is applied to a concrete experience of one of the participants that is accessible to all other participants. Systematic reflection upon this experience is accompanied by a search for shared judgments and underlying reasons for these. In the case of corporate sustainable development examples for such fundamental questions are the following:

- What does it mean to conduct a good life? (Relevant corporate key words: e.g. product policy, quality management, working conditions, innovation policies)

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[2] The NSD has been successfully applied in organisational learning (Kessels 1996), business ethics (Kessels 1997/2001), medical ethics (Birnbacher 1999), university teaching (Heckmann 1993, Birnbacher 1982, Kleinknecht 1989, Gronke/Stary 1998, Littig 1999), participatory technology assessment (Grießler/Littig 2002), as well as in primary education (Weierstraß 1967, Murris 2000).

- Is luxury necessary? (Relevant corporate key words: e.g. product policy, product innovation, marketing strategies)

- What does participation in the context of business enterprises mean? (Relevant corporate key words: e.g. working conditions, participatory strategies with stakeholders, risk management)

- Why should business enterprises realise solidarity? (Relevant corporate key words: e.g. international relations, social accountability, codes of conduct, marketing, credibility, personnel management, corporate citizenship)

- Under which circumstances does individual benefit justify collective risk? (Relevant corporate key words: e.g. environmental and social accountability, marketing, risk management)

- What does it mean to cooperate? (Relevant corporate key words: e.g. stake holder management, strategic management, synergy strategies, corporate citizenship).

These questions concern tacit matters and fundamental believes, which cannot be handled on an operational level. They cannot be answered by scientific investigation alone. They require thorough consideration and weighing up of arguments in a dialogue (as the Neo-Socratic Dialogue) (Kessels 1996).

What is basically Socratic in the NSD is the method of rigorous inquiry into the thoughts, concepts and values we hold as true. The NSD is a joint investigation into the assumptions we make when we formulate our thoughts.

The NSD follows the procedure given below:

- Before the discourse commences a well formulated, general question is devised.

- The first step is to collect concrete examples experienced by participants in which the given question plays a key role.

- The group selects one example, which will be the basis of the analysis and argumentation throughout the dialogue. This analysis usually starts with a concrete judgement based on the selected example and relating to the original question of the dialogue.

- Crucial statements made by the participants are written down on a flip chart or board, so that all can have an overview and be clear about the sequence of the discourse.

The NSD should be conducted by a trained facilitator. This facilitator has the following tasks: to ensure that participants mutually understand each other, refer to their own experience, proceed step by step, remain focused on the issue under discussion, participate equally in the dialogue, explain their contributions thoroughly, substantiate their judgements, strive for consensus, make progress in the dialogue. Moreover the facilitator documents the reasoning of the dialogue.[3] (S)He does not contribute to the content of the dialogue directly. The number of participants is limited from a minimum of five to a maximum of fifteen.

The participants of a NSD have to abide by the following rules:

- Each participant's contribution is based upon what (s)he has experienced, not upon what (s)he has read or heard.

- The thinking and questioning are honest. This means that only genuine doubts about what has been said should be expressed.

- It is the responsibility of all participants to express their thoughts as clearly and concisely as possible, so that everyone is able to build on the ideas contributed by others earlier in the dialogue.

- Participants should not concentrate exclusively on their own thoughts. They should make every effort to understand those of the other participants and if necessary seek clarification.

- Anyone who has lost sight of the question or the thread of the discussion should seek the help of others to clarify where the group stands.

- Abstract statements should be grounded in concrete experience in order to illuminate such statements.

- Inquiry into relevant questions continues as long as participants either hold conflicting views or have not yet reached clarity.

3. NSD in practise: A case-study

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[3] Most authorized facilitators of the NSD completed academic training before they started their training as facilitators (for further information see www.philosophisch-politische-akademie.de with links to various countries). This training is based upon a (minimum) two years' experience as participant in NSD. The practical and theoretical facilitator training lasts an additional two to three years and is supervised by an experienced facilitator (mentor). Qualification emphasised in the training as facilitator include: pedagogic competences, democratic attitudes, discourse ethics, psychological sense, awareness of group dynamics, and result orientation.

The NSD which will be described below was one part of a university seminar in environmental sociology at the University of Vienna (in 2001). Besides theories of risk, and risk society, and technology studies the basic ideas of sustainable development were addressed in the course.[4] The NSD should give the students the chance to improve their cognitive capability of argueing. Additional to that the NSD was presented as a method for working on the ethical implications of sustainable development with philosophical laypeople. Six students and the Socratic facilitator participated in the dialogue.[5] The NSD lasted nine hours altogether (three sessions going on for three hours). None of the participants had experienced an NSD before. The question, which the students choose for the NSD was: „Under what circumstances does individual benefit justify collective risk?"[6]

As usual the dialogue started with personal examples given from the participants' own experience. The following list includes the keywords of their examples:

List 1: The group's examples given from their personal experience:
1. Using public transport without buying a ticket
2. Riding a motorcycle while being drunk
3. Smoking cigarettes at a private (non-smoker) party
4. Using the car at a small distance to drive children to the kindergarden
5. Sending kids to the kindergarden despite the fact that they have a cold
6. Driving a car without having a driving licence
7. Skiing in an area where snow-slip is highly probable

Discussing the experiences with regard to their differences and similarities the following list of the individual benefit and the collective risk was made.

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[4] Although the dialogue was not conducted with business students it hopefully gives an insight into the idea and course of the NSD.

[5] The rest of the group, i.e. those who were not present in the first session of the NSD, observed the dialogue with regard to the interaction, the process, and the outcome of the dialogue.

[6] This question is fundamental for sustainable development. The question addresses the free-rider problem at all levels and scopes, individuals as well as organisations/corporations. In the given example the participants – most of them were students of sociology - focussed mainly on their individual behaviour. But when teaching sustainability for business the focus could easily be on corporate decision making, weighing up the corporate benefit against collective risk (e.g. environmental pollution).

List 2: Selecting the individual benefit and the collective risk from the examples:

Number of the example	Individual Benefit	Collective Risk
1	Saving money	Others have to pay more
2	Fun, comfort	Risk of accident
3	Smoking with relish, fun	Risk to health of oneself and others
4	Comfort, time saving	Air pollution
5	Comfort, stress reduction	Risk to health of other children
6	Fun	Risk of accident
7	Fun	Risk of snow slip/ risk to health and property of others

The example that has been selected for further analysis can been seen in the following diagram 1.[7] Furthermore the diagram shows the lines of argumenation which have been elaborated throughout the dialogue. The structure of digram follows from epistemological considerations. From an epistemological perspective the NSD is guided by the idea of regressive abstraction. This means that individual reason is gained from a concrete judgement and personal experience (Nelson 1965). According to argumentation theory concrete judgements have to be backed through backing rules or principles of a higher level than the judgement itself (e.g. Toulmin 1958). The aim of the Socratic dialogue is to find out these backing rules and to discuss the validity of the rules in relation to the particular example. This may lead to specifications (unless conditions) or explanations of the general rules, as it happend in the case study. [8]

Following the diagram the analysis of the selected example commenced with the example -giver's judgement on his behaviour. The group decided to start with the issue of comfort and time saving benefit in the judgement, and then to proceed with the health subject. During the dialogue the group divided into two camps: one following a more ecological line of argumentation (position A), the other following a more human centered, pragmatic line (position B). Interestingly the „environmentalists" were not parents, whereas the parents were more pragmatic. No

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[7] The choice of the example was taken because of two main reasons: the clarity of the situation and the easy comprehensiveness of the situation. All participants could easily imagine the situation of the example giver.
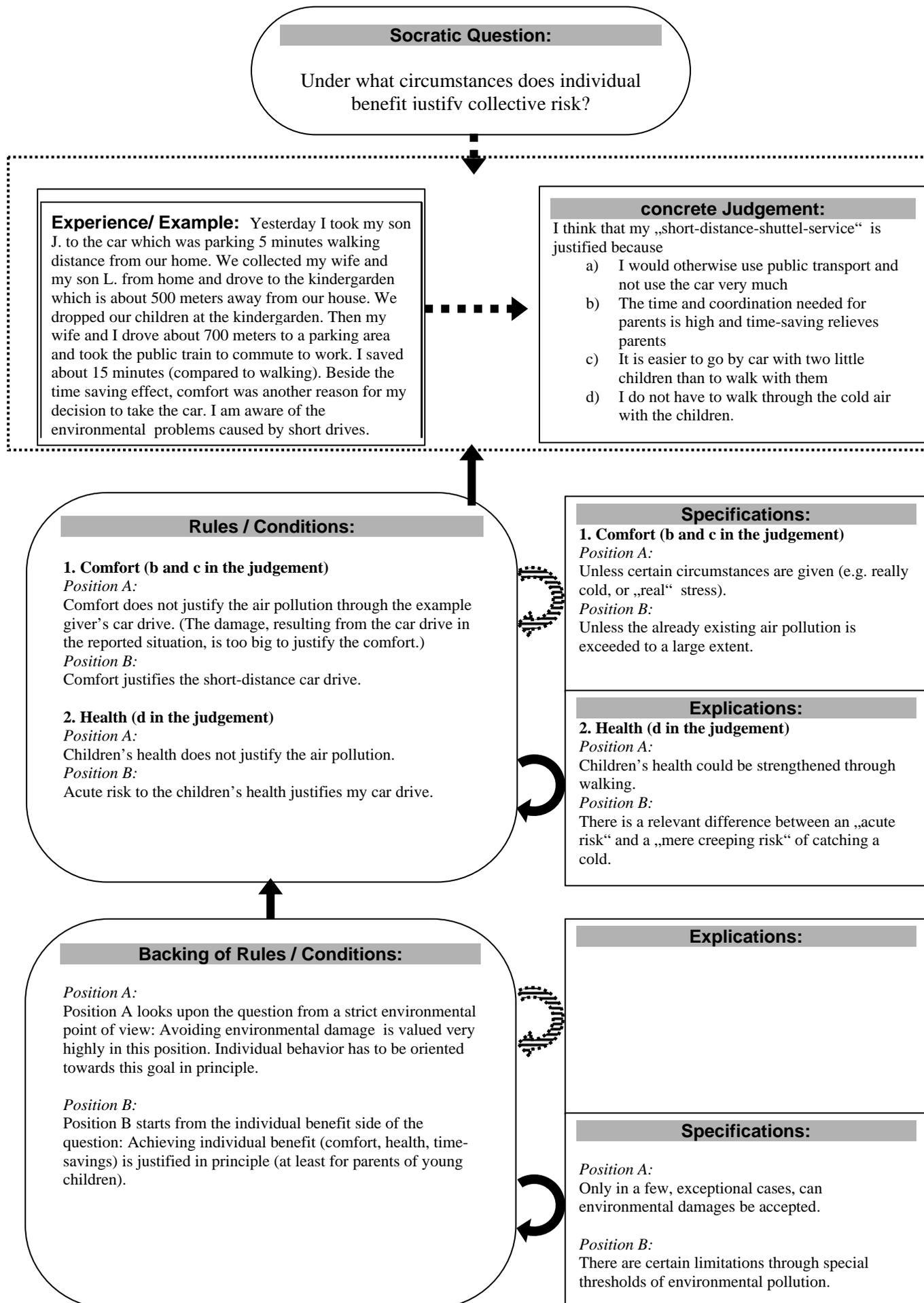
[8] The following analysis of this dialogue has been carried out by Peter Brune and the author of this article.

consensus about the two different views could be reached. But the single steps and arguments of the argumentation were worked out cleary. In a final stepp, the different lines of argumentation were applied to the other examples which were given at the beginning of the seminar.

The students' comments on the NSD were very positive. The students greatly appreciated the way of thinking carefully through each statement in detail. They experienced a lively dialogue in which they systematically elaborated an argument, being directly confronted with the comments of others. They also mentioned positively their emotional involvement and the respectful treatment they received in the discussion. They also gained self-assurence, in the sense that they trusted more in their capability of thinking on their own. Critically they remarked that nine hours as planned for the dialogue were not enough. They wished to have one or two more sessions to discuss their examples in more detail.[9]

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[9] With regard to business applications of the NSD it has to be stated that time limits often are a problem (Kessels 2001), Littig/Grießler 2002). Once started participants often get very sophisticated in investigating the questions and arguments presented in the group. Thorough investigation (even in a dialogical manner) needs time. Consequently the NSD should at least last for three or four hours. To cope with time restrictions the facilitator can use some accelerating-strategies, such as asking particiapnts to prepare examples in advance according to a certain structure, limiting the number of examples, concentrating on one line of argumentation etc.

Diagram 1

Socratic Question:

Under what circumstances does individual
benefit iustifv collective risk?

Experience/ Example: Yesterday I took my son
J. to the car which was parking 5 minutes walking
distance from our home. We collected my wife and
my son L. from home and drove to the kindergarden
which is about 500 meters away from our house. We
dropped our children at the kindergarden. Then my
wife and I drove about 700 meters to a parking area
and took the public train to commute to work. I saved
about 15 minutes (compared to walking). Beside the
time saving effect, comfort was another reason for my
decision to take the car. I am aware of the
environmental problems caused by short drives.

concrete Judgement:
I think that my „short-distance-shuttel-service" is
justified because
   a)   I would otherwise use public transport and
        not use the car very much
   b)   The time and coordination needed for
        parents is high and time-saving relieves
        parents
   c)   It is easier to go by car with two little
        children than to walk with them
   d)   I do not have to walk through the cold air
        with the children.

Rules / Conditions:

1. Comfort (b and c in the judgement)
Position A:
Comfort does not justify the air pollution through the example
giver's car drive. (The damage, resulting from the car drive in
the reported situation, is too big to justify the comfort.)
Position B:
Comfort justifies the short-distance car drive.

2. Health (d in the judgement)
Position A:
Children's health does not justify the air pollution.
Position B:
Acute risk to the children's health justifies my car drive.

Specifications:
1. Comfort (b and c in the judgement)
Position A:
Unless certain circumstances are given (e.g. really
cold, or „real" stress).
Position B:
Unless the already existing air pollution is
exceeded to a large extent.

Explications:
2. Health (d in the judgement)
Position A:
Children's health could be strengthened through
walking.
Position B:
There is a relevant difference between an „acute
risk" and a „mere creeping risk" of catching a
cold.

Backing of Rules / Conditions:

Position A:
Position A looks upon the question from a strict environmental
point of view: Avoiding environmental damage is valued very
highly in this position. Individual behavior has to be oriented
towards this goal in principle.

Position B:
Position B starts from the individual benefit side of the
question: Achieving individual benefit (comfort, health, time-
savings) is justified in principle (at least for parents of young
children).

Explications:

Specifications:

Position A:
Only in a few, exceptional cases, can
environmental damages be accepted.

Position B:
There are certain limitations through special
thresholds of environmental pollution.

4. Concluding remarks on using the NSD in teaching business sustainability

Sustainable development has become a common priority goal for the international community. Today universities, academic training centres, business schools and academies etc. are core actors for the dissemination of the principles of sustainable development.

This article wants to put forward the Neo-Socratic Dialogue as a useful instrument for teaching ethical questions of (business) sustainability. It started from the viewpoint that the ethical implications of sustainable development are not sufficiently considered in teaching programmes of sustainability. At least from the author's sociological teaching experiences in sustainability these programmes usually comprise the following topics: the history and main principles of sustainable development, conflicts and threats to sustainability and the ways of promoting sustainability in different contexts. The objective of the courses is to enhance positive attitudes towards sustainable development and environmental protection. Another objective is to provide the needed working knowledge to apply sustainability approaches in professional (business) practice, policies, and strategic guidelines. Last but not least they want to prepare and develop in students or in representatives of industries, or business personal, the professional and organisational skills necessary to implement practically the principles of sustainable development. Ethical reflection on the concept of sustainability in the NSD are a useful completion of teaching sustainability, especially in the business context. The NSD strongly takes the "subjective factor" of knowledge and capacity building that is increasingly required in the business context into account (Wieland/Grüninger 2002). The knowledge gained in the NSD not only increases cognitive capabilities (conceptual and perceptual), but also affective and socio-dynamic capabilities. If business organisations convincingly want to take up the challenge of sustainable development, their implicit ethical values have to become part of the moral constitution of a business enterprise (Wieland/Grüninger 2002). For reasons of credibility and implementation these values must be shared by the managers, by the employees and the teams "running the mill". The NSD can be helpful for achieving this goal. As mentioned above, the NSD has been internationally applied in different contexts, in business enterprises as well as in university education. So far there has been no documented application of the NSD in teaching sustainable business. But the experiences gathered in other, related fields

make the NSD a promising instrument to be implemented in this range of application also.

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