

The lesson described here took place in an Austrian secondary school. The students are in the 9th grade and are between 14 and 16 years old. The topic of the lesson is global plastic pollution, with the teacher placing a special focus on the role of the Global South in this issue.

The lesson begins and, after briefly addressing some typical organizational issues and allowing the students to settle down, the teacher asks the class: “What are the key messages from the → newspaper article [New WWF report: Global South bears tenfold cost of plastic pollution] that we read and worked on last lesson?” Some students respond: “90% of all seabirds are threatened with extinction!” – “It’s not very smart to pollute the ocean like that because many animals die.” – “Plastic waste costs poor countries much more, and I think that’s unfair.” The teacher nods with satisfaction and hands out a → worksheet. In addition to many tasks involving classifying, explaining, and visualizing various facts, the last task asks the students to design a “talking plastic bag” that addresses global plastic pollution.



Leo's Design



Nina's Design

CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS

While the students work on their designs, the teacher walks around the classroom and talks to them. She asks Nina what she means by “a clean future for everyone.” Nina replies in an uncertain voice: „Well, for everything that lives. People everywhere, but also all the animals. Isn't that right?” “Sure, of course, I was just wondering who you meant by ‘everyone!’” “Oh, right, exactly. Everything that suffers from it.”

Leo also wants to talk about his design and explains: „It’s a dead cat in a plastic bag... Because I once saw a dead cat in a plastic bag lying next to the road. It looked like it had really tried to free itself from the bag, and it was wrapped around its neck a lot, but it didn't make it. I can still remember it so well, it was really awful.” – “Oh, I’m sorry.” – “Yes, it was really awful. Since then, I really pay attention to plastic bags, lying around somewhere.”

After this intensive work phase, the lesson ends with some students volunteering to present their designs to the class. Five students volunteer, all of whom express that they find it unfair and distressing that animals around the world are suffering and dying as a result of plastic pollution.

Two weeks have passed since this lesson, and the teacher decides to ask the students anonymously for their personal → opinions on the topic. Here is a selection of the responses:

Do you personally think plastic pollution is bad? If so, what do you find worst about it?	Do you think something should change? If so, what do you think should change? Who should act differently?
<i>That people in the Global South suffer greatly from it and that we live as if there were more than one world.</i>	<i>The people who are involved in the production. Turning plastic into cardboard doesn't help.</i>
<i>Yes, I think it's terrible because animals die because of it.</i>	<i>There should be much stricter laws.</i>
<i>Yes, that many people are aware that it is bad, but they don't do anything and continue to throw trash, for example, on the ground.</i>	<i>Yes, people should deal with waste differently. More rules, use less plastic (except straws at McDonald's, for example).</i>
<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>

REFLECTION OF THE TEACHER

At the end of the lesson, the teacher shares the following observation: „I find it interesting that we didn't actually do anything with animals and there is hardly anything about animals in the text, but that seems to be what triggers them the most. I think that at the age of 15, they are still very much on this emotional track. I notice in the lower grades that they are still much more receptive to animal welfare issues; there is simply much more empathy and less of an attempt to rationalize it. But yes, the people in the Global South didn't really come up at all.”

The teacher and I look at the students' opinions together, and I ask them: “Do you think that every opinion that emerges after a lesson like this is equally valid for you? In other words, are you equally satisfied with each one?” This leads to a longer → conversation.