



ETH Week 2016

## Inspiration und ideas for life

**Challenging, inspiring, and motivating: at the ETH Week, students from all fields of study work together on sustainable ideas for projects related to great societal questions. The autonomous process of learning and thinking is at least as important as the topical content.**

Highly concentrated and a little tense, they await their appearance: soon, the 180 participants of the ETH Week will deliver five-minute-presentations showing what they have learned in only six days. This is virtually impossible – in this one week, the students have learned and experienced so much more than can be shown in a few minutes.

### **Acquiring expert knowledge and learning Design Thinking Methods**

For six days, from Sunday to Friday, in small groups of eight to ten students, assisted by a tutor, they have been working on the subject of this year's ETH Week's subject "Challenging Water". They have heard numerous presentations by experts and have gone on field trips to industrial compounds, NGOs, hydropower plants, and sewage treatment plants. These extensive expert inputs formed the base for the elaboration of individual solutions for a sustainable use of water, our most precious resource.

Then the students combined this expert knowledge with the process of "Design Thinking", to which they were introduced by several specialists. Design Thinking originated in creative product development. The method aims at user-oriented solutions, whose applications are visualized by concrete models. Thus, some participants developed educational campaigns for schools or consumers, while others chose technical water-saving solutions for showers, toilets, or whole communities.

### **Coalescing into a team**

Discussions of a multi-faceted subject such as water and the development of an individual research question and an idea for a project were, however, only part of this week's challenge. The focus was rather on coalescing into a well-rehearsed team, which will inspire one another and develop an innovative idea together within just a few days. No simple task – especially since students from all fields, from Bachelor and Master degree courses, may participate at the ETH Week. In order for the participants to become acquainted sufficiently to be able to work together successfully, there are specific team-building elements, as well as sports activities in the mornings and collective meals and activities in the evenings, to complement the technical and methodical program. This ensures that in spite of the shortage of time, everyone gains enough confidence to participate, pose questions, or sometimes even brush up against each other. "At the beginning of the week, everyone is still shy and guarded," Julien Helfenstein tells us. He is assisting the students as a tutor. It is already his second time attending an ETH Week. "The better they get to know each other, the more they open up, and there are more discussions, even confrontational arguments about focal points and approaches to solve a problem." Thus, the small groups don't undergo a straightforward process of development. Ideas are developed and then rejected, taken up again, only to try something entirely new in the end. However, this is just what makes the ETH Week special: The students are supposed to learn about interdisciplinary work, critical discussion of topics, and how to develop ideas autonomously.

## Interdisciplinary collaboration

"I find it highly motivating to work on a project together with others, and the blend of different fields of study is great. It's a whole different way of learning," says participant Théophile Messin-Riozard, a Bachelor student of mechanical engineering. "The interdisciplinary exchange is immensely helpful," confirms Gunther Klobe, a Master student of physics. "You learn to understand the vocabulary of other disciplines, and at the same time to translate yourself in a way that makes your meaning clear for others. I also like that we are learning something new in a playful way here." The closer the final day draws, the more close-knit the team spirit becomes. On Thursday, the penultimate day, the project ideas of each group have to be ready: For the presentation on the final day, there are now still the prototypes to create and the five-minute-presentations to be developed. The focus is not just on originality, relevance, and the feasibility of the idea, but also on the form of the presentation, so everything needs to be prepared as well as possible – within just a few hours. This represents an enormously work-intensive effort for all participants.



Team Smart Fish presenting their project (Photograph: Alessandro della Bella)

## Development and presentation of individual ideas

At last, the time has come: On Friday afternoon, the 18 small groups present their results of an eventful week at the big final to a jury and the other participants. All of them are applauded and cheered enthusiastically; there are prizes for "the most inspiring story" and "the most fascinating scientific approach", as well as an audience award, for which the participants can vote via app. And even though only three groups are awarded a prize in the end, all of the participants can profit a lot from this collective time, gaining motivation, creative work methods, team experience, new friends, and



Keynote speaker Maude Barlow (Photograph: Alessandro della Bella)

expert knowledge. Finally, ETH Rector Sarah Springmann wishes all participants the best success: "I hope the ETH Week can serve as an inspiration for your further studies at the ETH and the rest of your life." (by Inken De Wit)

Website ETH Week

[www.ethz.ch/ETHweek](http://www.ethz.ch/ETHweek) →

Facebook ETH Week

<https://www.facebook.com/ETHWeek> →

Critical Thinking Initiative

<https://www.ethz.ch/services/en/teaching/critical-thinking/initiative.html> →

### ETH WEEK

A project of the "Critical Thinking" initiative at the ETH Zurich

#### Participants:

Bachelor, Master, and exchange students from all disciplines

#### Duration:

6 days (Sunday to Friday)

#### Initiator:

Dr. Christine Bratrach,  
Head of ETH Sustainability