

Ecological Literacy in Social Work Education: Using a Scenario-based Approach to Bring Community Spaces into the Classroom

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Abstract: The social work profession is increasingly being called upon to deal with the social consequences of the global ecological crisis, including climate change. Despite this the profession has been slow to engage with issues of environment and ecology, instead tending to retain an exclusively socio-cultural focus. As this situation is challenged by social workers recognizing the importance of an eco-social approach, efforts are being made to integrate issues of the environment into the social work curriculum. This paper describes the use of a scenario-based approach to bring the space of ‘community’ into the classroom, allowing students can engage in a collaborative exercise to explore community development oriented action for a sustainable future. The use of a scenario-based approach has proven effective in supporting learners to challenge existing assumptions about environment, community and the social work profession, and in creating a safe and supported space where new ways of thinking and being can be tested out. The paper backgrounds the discussion around environmental issues within social work, discusses the use of scenario-based techniques and details the use of one such technique in a core social work unit.

Social Work and the Environment

As a profession, social work has been slow to recognize and engage with the environmental challenges facing the planet today. This is despite the fact that the profession is increasingly being called upon to address the social consequences of environmental problems such as climate change, and despite the tradition within social work of considering ‘private problems’ in their wider contexts (Alston & Kent, 2004; Besthorn & Myer, 2010; Lam, 2007; McMichael, Woodruff, & Hales, 2006).

Efforts to address this blind spot are being made across various aspects of the profession, and a growing literature in this area indicates that many social work educators, researchers and practitioners are working towards embedding a deeper ecological consciousness within the core values of the profession (see, for example, Alston & Besthorn, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012, Kemp, 2011). In some countries of the Global North and West, the importance of such environmental considerations for the profession is being reflected in the content of ‘foundation documents’ such as national codes of ethics. The ethical code of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), for example, notes that “The social work profession also recognises that social work takes place in a context whereby social systems have a mutually interdependent relationship with the natural environment” (AASW, 2010, p. 9. Section 1.3) and clearly points out that “Social workers will meet their responsibilities to society by engaging in action to promote societal and environmental wellbeing” (AASW, 2010, p. 20, Section 5.1.3, Clause J).

In many respects, the transformation proposed by such statements, and which is slowly unfolding, can be thought of as the challenge of developing ‘ecological literacy’ within a profession that has not previously been concerned with the natural environment. Given the traditional neglect of

this area within social work, such a change represents a profound transformation of the profession's foundational concerns, values and knowledge base. For some, such change will need to involve a dramatic shift away from a tightly focused emphasis on social justice, towards a vision that incorporates notions of environmental and ecological justice. Besthorn (2013), for example, calls for a shift towards a 'radical equalitarian ecological justice' (p. 37) as the way forward for the profession. Such a profound transformation is exactly what will be required if the profession is to engage with the environmental crisis in a meaningful and effective manner.

Ecology, Transformative Learning and Social Work Education

Despite some encouraging signs, there remains a great deal to be done in order to achieve this goal. One area of particular importance is the integration of environmental learning into professional social work education, and the development of pedagogical approaches and educational techniques that will facilitate this inclusion and the subsequent shift in ecological orientation (Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Jones, 2011, 2013). Transformative learning theory represents an approach to learning that focuses on facilitating change in learners' meaning perspectives—asking them to critically reflect on existing assumptions in the light of new and challenging information (Mezirow, 1997, 2012; Baumgartner, 2012). Given the set of circumstances that confront social work educators with an interest in promoting ecological literacy, transformative learning approaches offer great potential as a pedagogical lens through which this task might be viewed and approached.

Various thinkers and writers in the field of transformative learning have noted that there is no single approach or technique that guarantees transformative learning experiences will occur (see, for example, Cranton, 2002, 2006). However, it seems clear that in order for learners to open the potential for transformation, they need to be personally engaged in such a way that they are motivated to reflect on their existing, and taken for granted, assumptions about themselves and the world around them. This can be a challenging task, particularly when professional, institutional and pedagogical demands seem to restrict the available options for creative and innovative approaches. An example of such an educational context is where courses are being developed and delivered in distance education or blended learning modes, where the level of face-to-face contact with students may be significantly reduced (Jones & Miles, 2012).

The Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program offered at James Cook University is a four-year professional degree, accredited by the AASW. '*Developmental Approaches to Eco-Social Justice*' is a core (compulsory) third year unit for students enrolled in both the social work degree program and those studying in the Bachelor of Sustainability (BSust) program. The goals of the subject are to support social work students in beginning to explore the ways in which the natural environment might be considered as a core concern for their profession, and to encourage both social work and sustainability students to consider the value of community development-based approaches to practice with an environmental/sustainability focus. For social work students in particular, this unit can be experienced as quite challenging as it presents an argument for the expansion of their existing professional 'socio-cultural' focus towards a vision of social work based on an inherent and embedded concern for the non-human world. The question most often posed by social work students at the beginning of the unit is one of relevance—how will a concern with the natural environment fit with my future practice as a social worker, and in particular with practice in fields such as disability, child-protection, domestic violence, poverty alleviation, and interpersonal counseling, to name but a few.

The unit is offered in ‘limited attendance’ mode, an example of a blended learning pedagogy that combines distance education, using online materials and both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, with a three-day residential workshop in the middle of the semester. Students enrolled in the unit travel to the workshop from many different locations across Australia and indeed, internationally.

The on-campus residential workshop represents a unique opportunity for students to come together and share their understandings of material which has been taught to that point from a distance. It is also an opportunity to harness the energy and benefits of experiential group-work for a cohort of students who have often been learning in geographical isolation. The workshop therefore eschews the traditional lecture-tutorial format and adopts a scenario-based approach to ‘solving’ an authentic, practice-based problem over the three days of the workshop.

Scenario-based Approach to the Space of ‘Community’

Scenario-based learning is an approach to learning which seeks to use simulations to replicate real-world situations (Stewart, 2007; Carroll, 2000; Siddiqui, Khan & Akhtar, 2008). It is particularly useful in educational settings where practical skills and ‘realistic’ thinking are desirable learning outcomes, but where circumstances prohibit or restrict engagement with actual real-world situations (Errington, 2010). It can also be particularly effective in situations where the amount of face-to-face contact is truncated or condensed, requiring more intensive approaches to connecting students with authentic learning situations. Within social work, for example, scenario-based approaches are often utilized to allow students the opportunity to grapple with realistic issues in an environment which is safe and supported and where engagement with, for example, actual clients may not be desirable or appropriate.

In the unit discussed here, a scenario-based approach is used to encourage students to consider the ways in which environmental issues manifest and impact on communities, and how, as community development practitioners, an ecological orientation may help them to see, understand and work with communities to address these issues. The activity takes the space of ‘community’, in both its physical and socio-cultural senses, with which most learners are familiar and challenges them to think about and understand it in a new way. This includes a reflective consideration of their own place and role in community and the way that an expanded ecological literacy might transform their understanding of these relationships. Community, as the term is used here, relates to both geographical and functional communities and indeed to the important relationships that may exist between these (Kenny, 2011). The concept also reflects the increasing recognition of the important role that ‘place’ plays in our lives and socio-environmental contexts (Roulier, 2014) and the way that this may influence a range of practice modalities within social work (Zapf, 2010; Mendes, 2012; Aimers & Walker, 2011).

The Workshop Process

Prior to arrival at the workshop, students are provided with a detailed scenario and are informed that while at the workshop they will be working in groups on a task related to this scenario. The scenario itself consists of an information-rich description of a fictional community. The description contains information across a range of aspects, including demographic information relating to the population, geographically descriptive information about the landscape, both natural and human-altered, information on services, utilities, community groups, crime rates, voting patterns etc. Embedded within the description is information which indicates a range of social and

environmental issues as well as social dynamics and inter-group relationships. While the community is fictional it has been designed to reproduce aspects of the rural and regional communities that many of the attending students will live in or have experienced in their own lives.

Upon arrival at the workshop students are assigned into groups and each group is then given a specific role and task description. The 'roles' involve students placing themselves as members of community organisations or groups who have an opportunity to develop a community-based strategy to address social and environmental issues relevant to their purpose. Examples of groups and organisations include aged-care providers, youth shelters, migrant support services etc. The students must then operate within this virtual community space to understand the issues and dynamics present in the community as well as the nature and focus of their role and to then develop plans for professional practice/interventions that would generate community participation in action towards a more environmentally sustainable and socially equitable community.

The strategies/interventions that student groups develop need to include a number of dimensions. Firstly, they must reflect an expanded understanding of the nature and extent of social and environmental issues within the community and, importantly, the connections between these. This identification and linking of elements requires that students employ a systems thinking approach (Meadows, 2008; Armson, 2011). Secondly they must design a strategy that simultaneously addresses both social and environmental issues. This serves as something of an antidote to the type of reductionist, atomized thinking that is characteristic of modernity and often implicated in the genesis of the ecological crisis (Coates, 2003). Lastly, the strategy must be grounded in the principles and practices of an ecologically oriented community development approach, ensuring that attention is paid to issues such as process, participation and valuing local wisdom (Ife, 2013; Dominelli, 2012; Kenny, 2011). This task then occupies the group across the three-day workshop, with unit facilitators spending time with each group and occasionally bringing all groups together for brief plenary sessions where obstacles and ideas are discussed. At the end of the three days groups then present their developed understandings of the community, along with their proposed strategy and account of the community development process required for its implementation, to the larger class for discussion and critique.

Outcomes

The transformative potential of the exercise is revealed as many students come to see that their existing frames of reference are not adequate for the deep understanding of environment, ecology and community required for meaningful engagement with the scenario community and with this task. Students are often led to reflect on their own experience of both the natural world and their own communities and to begin questioning some of their taken-for-granted assumptions about these. This is particularly challenging for many social work students as it takes them beyond their awareness of the traditional 'social justice' issues with which they are usually concerned.

The scenario-based approach allows students to grapple with these issues in a safe and supported environment which, while 'virtual' in a practical sense, represents an authentic challenge of the type faced by social work and sustainability practitioners in their practice. It brings the space of 'community' into the classroom and allows students to explore and test out ideas with each other. In order to make progress with the task, students quickly find that they need to reflect on their own assumptions and to test out new ways of thinking and new sets of beliefs. While there is no doubt that for some students this experience is quickly filed away as an 'exception' to their existing ideas

about practice and the environment, student feedback indicates that for many others the task acts as a catalyst for deeper consideration of these issues and represents, for some at least, a transformative learning experience.

The scenario-based approach described here constitutes a relatively simple task and one which can claim to make only a modest contribution to a much bigger goal. However, it can be seen that by approaching this technique through the lens of transformative learning, students often make significant progress towards not only changing their own worldviews but also recognizing the value of an expanded ecological literacy for their professional social work identity. This in turn is making a significant contribution to the wider goal of embedding such literacy into the social work profession as a whole. In this sense the practice described here may serve as an example of the way in which physical and functional spaces may be brought into the classroom in authentic and meaningful ways, in the service of helping students learn the knowledge and skills required to address the larger goal of moving towards a more ecologically and social sustainable future.

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