Moving beyond the metaphor, reaching beyond the rhetoric: Social work education in a changing environment

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A B S T R A C T

This article explores Australian social work's engagement with environmental concerns through a review of scholarly literature and professional documentation, and suggests the professional imagination and espoused professional identity of social work practice as expressed in Australian social work education share significant common ground with the concerns of sustainability education. This raises the question of why it is that social work has yet to infuse, embed, or otherwise engage with the adoption of the principles of education for sustainability. The review found that social work has developed some momentum in negotiating challenges emerging as a consequence of climate change and other forms of complexity, but remains educationally challenged by the imperatives that follow commitment to sustainability in practice. To move beyond the metaphorical sense in which social work has previously used the term 'environment' requires re-framing of social work education's purview, and rethinking of the approaches used to incorporate sustainability concerns into professional practice qualifications. Principles of inquiry based learning and sustainability education are suggested, as the next step towards integrating and embedding the concerns of the future with revised social work praxis.

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1. Introduction

Higher Education may be identified as the 'gatekeeper' of professions (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Since the World Commission on Sustainability released the Brundtland Report, we have a gradual groundswell of activity in the higher education sector around the world. Much of this has been at the level of curriculum development, driven in part by the UNESCO Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14). Academic champions of sustainability have identified both objectives and processes in the move toward a sustainability literate graduate community, across all disciplines and professional fields (Shephard, 2015). Success in this endeavour has been limited and piecemeal (Thomas, 2004; Jones et al., 2010). What might be described as the entire recalibration of the higher education mission has mostly manifest in localised instances of curriculum change and professional development programs which remain limited to isolated innovation (see Hegarty & Holdsworth, in Barth et al., 2015.

Social work has made use of environmental metaphors in theorizing practice, especially with reference to the ecology of social systems. Environmental research has demonstrated contemporary forms of social inequality and social injustice emerging from the complex political dynamics surrounding questions of climate change and impact mitigation and adaptation. This paper argues there is a role for social work to play in understanding these dynamics, which entails a reintegration of the natural environment into social work's theoretical frames. To engage in a non-trivial sense with the possible futures for social work practice in a context of increasing climate instability requires a conceptual break with the modernist origins of social work's self-understanding, and a reconceptualization of professional practice in increasingly post-industrial and chaotic social contexts, shaped inevitably by the impacts of climate change. In the absence of a natural environment that sustains human life, there will be no future need for social workers.

This paper explores the intersection between the domains of sustainability and social work through reviewing current theorisations and framing instances of the ecological within the social work discipline. An inquiry-based approach to capacity building illustrates how sustainability principles can be utilised for social work educators and professionals at the front line of diabolical 21st century problems.

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2. Background: sustainability education and social work

Climate change and biodiversity loss impacts are experienced by communities across collective and individual life cycles, which might be termed ecosystems. As is often the case, impacts are mediated by social contexts and existing structural injustices are compounded (Steele et al., 2012). Equally, adaptation to climate change and mitigation of a range of environmental crises are dependent on massive social change and the creation of new forms of meaning, affect and belonging (Woodward et al., 2014; Rockström et al., 2009; Sen, 2013). Sustainability is a whole of endeavour concern and academics in this field have been exhorted to engage with all disciplines to find points of entry and collaboration.

How such collaboration works depends not only on the recognition by disciplines and professions (in this case social work) that ecosystems are not the exclusive provenance of environmentalists and scientists, but also on finding meaningful ways in which to engage at the professional level beyond exhortations to attend to the importance of nature as part of professional practice. While this point has already been made (McKinnon, 2012; Coates, 2003), significant work remains to be done in order to embed ecological and environmental concerns and insights from sustainability studies in social work curricula.

Sustainability education emerged from a range of disciplinary origins, including environmental and peace studies and values education (Selby, 2006). It is variously known as education for sustainability, education for sustainable development and environmental education, signalling differences in emphasis and desired outcome. Regardless of preferred name and framing, sustainability education movements have generally understood themselves and their project to be the diffusion of sustainability literacies (knowledge and skills) into all disciplines and professional fields within higher education. As Kumar et al., proposed, (in 2005: 215), "It is the mission of universities to prepare these future employees to meet this need."

While academics might agree that this is a reasonable notion in the contemporary moment, the form this diffusion takes, and the mechanisms for bringing it about, have been subject to a decade of scrutiny (Barth et al., 2015). Instances, critical and otherwise, of sustainability education initiatives, form the basis of the literature. Among these are examples of projects to engage, foster and understand the ways in which disciplines variously connect to or make sense of notions of sustainability in a localised, professionally inflected way (Sibbel et al., 2013). We have long known that only through intellectual and moral ownership do disciplines, and the scholarly communities within them, 'take up' a sense of obligation (Becher and Trowler, 2001). In the light of the IPCC 5 report (IPCC, 2014) and daily global impacts of climate change and resource scarcity, we are confronted with an urgent need to equip graduates for the 'wicked', uncontainable problems of the contemporary moment.

The discussion within the sustainability education literature has tended to focus on notions of diffusion and embeddedness of sustainability knowledge and principles and how these relate to, and differ between, disciplines and fields. Perhaps in reflection of the applied focus that the precursor disciplines bring, there is strong emphasis in the sustainability education literature on a wide-range of competencies, attributes and skills for sustainability (Barth et al., 2007; Wiek et al., 2011). Generally, the focus has been on applied curriculum and the design of competencies into learning activities (Batterman et al., 2011).

It is generally recognised that a 'bolt on' or parallel approach to sustainability education is ineffective, although we argue that it has often been a necessary transition step for the sustainability education project (Sterling, 2004; Hegarty et al., 2011). The diffusion approach might be read as an exhortation to disciplines to take up the sustainability imperative, without the appropriate outreach and collegial cross disciplinary engagement needed to lead and assist this endeavour. Yet the difficulties of deep interdisciplinary practice, the nature of which is required for this project, have been well documented. Becher and Trowler (2001: 23) have identified the primary role played by academics' disciplinary identities in willingness to consider epistemological shifts. Reid and Petocz (2006) see this operating in reverse, as sustainability education academics' expressed disquiet about giving over ownership of curriculum design to academics from other disciplines. Such a binary response greatly undermines the collegial engagement needed for sustainability education diffusion.

Even as many factors have been identified as creating obstacles to diffusion of sustainability education (Thomas et al., 2012), the lived experience of diabolical problems like climate change continues apace. If we accept the premise that the sustainability education project relies on local academic champions, we must begin with innovations that may initially be isolated but which can be cascaded and broadened over time.

Even prior to the inception of the UN Decade on ESD, sustainability education scholars have offered many exhortations to all disciplines and professional fields; some of these directly locate the key concerns of sustainability in the domain of social work,

> Definitions of sustainability or sustainable development are contested, but most agree they involve recalibrating economic and social policies and practices to support economy, ecology, and equity. (Corcoran and Wals, 2004: ix)

> The history of the concept, going back to its roots at the first United Nations meeting that concerned itself with the relationship between people and their social and natural environments … (Corcoran and Wals, 2004: 4)

Sustainability principles in the frame of education for sustainable development have been subject to considerable critique on the basis of their potentially contradictory interaction in practice. Specifically with respect to the interdependence of contemporary poverty reduction strategies, economic growth and unsustainable environmental practices, ESD is implicated in the long standing post-development critique (Sachs, 1992). As noted by Washington (2015: 36) "Sustainability … must be a much *broader concept* than 'sustainable development'. It should focus on sustainability in the long-term for all aspects of the human and natural environment. It should certainly not be about growth in numbers, resource use or GDP".

Education for sustainability scholarship can usefully be distinguished from ESD by its critical analysis of the rhetoric of sustainable development and the contradictions and paradoxes that ensue from its uncritical adoption (Hegarty, 2016). Of particular relevance to social work are two main tensions. The first is between anthropocentric and ecocentric conceptions of justice (Washington et al., 2017), which challenges social work's humanist orientation and reframes social work's commitment to human rights as inextricably linked with and contingent on an ecocentric understanding of justice (Dominelli, 2013; Teixeira and Krings, 2015). A second tension is borne of the critique of the tacit and explicit inclusion of economic growth in sustainable development goals (Kopnina, 2014, 2017), and related conflict between poverty reduction strategies and the globalisation of unsustainable consumption. Bonnett (1999) sees these tensions as grounded in the ambiguities inherent in the original Brundtland formulation.

From this perspective, where decoupled from development,