



The ‘sustainability lens’: A framework for nurse education that is ‘fit for the future’

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SUMMARY

In this paper we describe and justify a framework for curriculum development that uses the concept of a sustainability lens. This is based on an understanding that we construct our social worlds and create a reality based upon what Gadamer (1977) called ‘prejudices’. The social world of nurse education has its own prejudices, referred to by Scrimshaw (1983) as ‘ideologies’. These form often taken for granted assumptions and values about what education is. The framework bases itself on how sustainability conceptualises health, and 4 approaches to health care delivery, along two continua of individual–society and illness–wellbeing. Further, we argue that in response to a wider education for sustainability agenda, nurse educators could develop their own sustainability lens and bring it to bear on this framework to interpret professional standards in a new way.

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Introduction

This paper outlines a framework for curriculum development which addresses the need for producing nurse graduates who are sustainability literate (Stibbe, 2009) and ‘fit for the future’ (NHSSDU, 2009), one in which the health and security impacts of climate change may be quite severe (Costello et al., 2009; British Medical Journal, 2011). The justification for addressing sustainability and climate change in nurse education has been argued elsewhere (Goodman and Richardson, 2010; Goodman, 2011; Barna et al., 2012), the focus here is on understanding how a curricula gets created based on particular interpretations of nurse education which may not currently be informed by sustainability concepts. This understanding of curriculum development is based on Gadamer’s concept of ‘prejudice’, Scrimshaw’s notion of educational ideologies and the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The framework itself links different approaches to health care delivery to the construction of our own ‘lens’, or a new ‘prejudice’ to inform curriculum development.

Curriculum Development, and the Social Construction of Reality Using an Interpretive ‘Lens’

When developing a curriculum we engage in constructing a social world using a world view, often based on assumed educational ideologies (Scrimshaw, 1983), which shapes the terms of any debate over

such issues as learning outcomes and pedagogy. Scrimshaw refers to ideologies as sets of values and beliefs, which we take to mean a set of presuppositions, ideas and concepts that shape how we see the world. It is this ‘seeing’ the world that leads to the metaphor of the lens. We therefore mean the cognitive processes undertaken to construct a social world based on a particular world view that then informs and interprets how the world is seen and should be seen. The lens itself is a set of ideas and concepts and what Gadamer (1977) calls ‘prejudice’. Gadamer suggests that we all have our own prejudices or “horizons” which may act as biases for interpretation. ‘Prejudice’ in common use may mean something negative but in the sense we are using it this is not necessarily the case. Prejudices can be positive and are *not* unalterable. Gadamer (1977) argued:

“Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word [pre-judgment], constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are our biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us. This formulation certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass saying, ‘Nothing new will be said here.’” (p. 9).

Our task is thus to be critically self-reflective of our prejudices so that we know what ‘constitutes our initial directedness’ and then to develop a curriculum whereby we can say “*something* new will be said here”, a process which is based on challenged assumptions and critiques of tacit knowledge and cherished notions about what the

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purpose of education should be. This is to root that process in an awareness that we are constructing a particular social world, in this case the social world of nurse education. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) argued:

“The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained by these” (p. 33).

We argue similarly that the world of education may be taken for granted by curriculum developers, originating in their own thoughts and actions in their everyday practices.

Berger and Luckman also say,

“What is ‘real’ to a Tibetan monk may not be ‘real’ to an American Businessman. The ‘knowledge’ of the criminal differs from the ‘knowledge’ of the criminologist. It follows that specific agglomerations of ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ pertain to specific social contexts...” (p. 15).

What is real to a nurse rooted in a biomedical approach to health care delivery may not be real to a nurse rooted in sustainability literacy. They do not always share the same knowledge. If the former develops a curriculum it will be constructed very differently from the latter, even if both use the same professional body standards as guiding principles. They use different lenses, using different prejudices, and will interpret the standards differently to construct different curricula.

Developing a Sustainability Lens

The background to educators developing their sustainability lens crosses several decades. During the 1980s the United Nations General Assembly established the Brundtland Commission which published (1987), a report: ‘Our Common Future’. This was a global initiative to unite countries around sustainability principles. This is not the definitive start by any means of a sustainability paradigm, it does however provide a starting point for anyone wishing to develop sustainability (or eco) literacy. In 1999, the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership was established. During the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002, the International Association of Universities (IAU), the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF), Copernicus Campus, and UNESCO launched the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP) to promote education for sustainable development in particular among higher education institutions. Japan and Sweden particularly chose to focus on Education for Sustainable Development.

More recently, in 2002, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the years from 2005 to 2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). Responses by governments around the world include ‘Caring for Our Future’ (2006) which is the Australian Government’s Strategy. The United States response to DESD includes a partnership of several hundred individuals, organisations, and institutions dedicated to the overall aim of seeing sustainable development fully integrated into education and learning. Washington State University states that it:

“has created tools for nursing faculty to consider inserting into curricula to increase the effort beyond WSU to nursing colleges across the nation and the world” (WSU, 2013).

In the UK the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has a ‘thematic area’ of education for sustainable development with a purpose to help institutions develop curricula and pedagogy. We now have curricula guidance such as the HEA’s ‘Future Fit Framework’ (Sterling, 2012) which is designed for educators interested in sustainability

education applied to their discipline, to assist them with developing their ‘sustainability lens’.

It is probably fair to say however that all of these initiatives have yet to make any wide impact on nursing education, particularly in the United Kingdom, although there is a growing number of sustainability education developers beginning to coordinate through the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare (2013). This may be because our nursing lens has been instrumental in nature and not fully aware of developments in sustainability education. We therefore need to examine what lens (or ideology) we use to construct curricula, to reflect on our presuppositions and ‘prejudice’.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum has been described as a ‘battleground of competing ideologies’ (Kelly, 1999, p. 19). As we have noted, Scrimshaw (1983) described at least four educational ideologies which have been implicated in this battle:

1. Liberal humanism – education is a ‘good’ in itself.
2. Instrumentalism – education is for a purpose, a job.
3. Progressivism – education is for personal growth and development.
4. Social reconstructivism – education is for social change.

These are the background often uncontested and/or unrecognised ideologies that drive curricular developments. For nursing education, there is little explicit acknowledgement of these 4 ideologies in the ‘training’ of nurses within a largely taken for granted skills and competencies framework in order to produce ‘fit for practice’ and ‘fit for purpose’ curricula. It is also arguable that nurse education, along with much of higher education generally, is dominated by an instrumentalist ideology (Collini, 2011; Goodman, 2012; Morrall and Goodman, 2013; Roggero, 2011). This is the first step, acknowledging our ‘prejudices’.

The principles of education for sustainable development and the concepts of sustainability and ecoliteracy cannot be detailed here, suffice to say that the concepts go beyond instrumentalism in educational practice. Sustainability is a multi-dimensional concept (e.g. sustainable economics, environment and society), but in educational terms, the 4 ideologies can be seen in the principles that underpin education for sustainability (Sterling, 2001; Stibbe, 2009).

Sustainability is not just a public health issue. It requires political, social, economic, organisational and personal changes and addresses the health of individuals as well as populations. Sustainability has ramifications for clinical practice: resource use, waste management, energy, food and travel issues in the acute hospital, as the National Health Service Sustainable Development Unit recognises (NHSSDU, 2009).

To develop a sustainability lens, nurse educators will need to immerse themselves in the literature and explore some core concepts. A start would be to consider Education for Sustainability (Efs) principles (Sterling, 2001, 2012; Selby, 2007), concepts of Eco literacy (Orr, 1992, 2004; Reynolds et al., 2010) and it is clear that instrumentalism is only part of the total approach. Efs and the sustainability literature, see especially David Orr (2004), often addresses the other three ideologies as crucial to personal development, social change and preparation for it.

In health education, then, we have an issue about whether to focus on addressing a ‘clinical skills based instrumental vision’ for a ‘fit for NHS practice’ approach only, or do we also prepare nurses for the complex health needs of communities and populations in a globalised world, characterised by inequalities in health requiring a climate justice framework (Rao, 2009).

To illustrate this framework we may consider the orientations to our practice along two continua:

1. Individual–society.
2. Illness–well-being.

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