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Ecology and Social Justice: A Course Designed for Environmental Social Work in Rural Spaces

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Abstract. This article describes a course developed by the author that responds to the stated social justice aims of the social work profession. If social workers are to advocate successfully for environments conducive to the general welfare of all people, promote social justice, equitable distribution of resources, and just environmental management, environmental social work scholarship needs to move beyond theorizing and suggestions itemizing broad responses, and provide instead illustrative examples of interventions and alternative practices. The trend in very recent years of environmental social work scholarship has done just this. Education, in particular in the classroom setting, provides an opportunity to explore and share experiments with social work praxis. This article is one such example.

Keywords: environmental social work, environmental justice,
social work education, critical pedagogy

Academics and engaged citizens increasingly recognize the growing threat of environmental challenges. Indeed it would be difficult in this culture of social and traditional media to be unaware of the contemporary eco-crisis given the seeming ubiquity of images and information indicating a planet, and its inhabitants, in distress. Humankind faces issues such as water and air pollution, toxic chemicals and related environmental health concerns, and food security problems, among others. Moreover, there are challenges associated specifically with anthropogenic climate change, for example, droughts, fires, storms, floods, the recently identified inexorable collapse of the West Antarctic ice shelf, the ineluctable rise in sea levels, and the creation of environmental refugees as a consequence of many of these phenomena. There continue to be climate change deniers, typically those heavily invested in the gains procured from carbon fuels (Gore, 2014). However, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and respected scientists, such as James Hansen, concur unequivocally that not only is climate change real and anthropogenic (some argue Amerogenic as well; see, for example, Schönfeld, 2010), but also remediation is required if the most catastrophic scenarios are to be avoided (Hansen, 2009, IPCC, 2014). On the global stage, super typhoon Haiyan, known as typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines, is an example of the devastation that can be wrought by unabated climate change. In the Canadian context, recurring flooding in the province over the past two years leading to states of emergency provides another dramatic example of climate change effects. It is in this context that the author conceived an elective titled “Ecology and Social Justice.” This course was developed with a strong focus on rural and urban environmental praxis and built iteratively on the extant social work literature pertaining to environmental thought and practice.

Social Work and the Environment

Social work has been slow to assume the eco-crisis as part of its professional purview, a peculiar fact given the profession’s long history, beginning with the Settlement House Movement, of person-in-environment considerations and engagement in activism, community organizing, and advocating for social reform and environmental change (Berson, 2004; Elshtain,

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2002; Fradin & Fradin, 2006; Zapf, 2009). In the 1980s and 1990s, social work scholarship moved beyond ecology as metaphor, as conceptualized in the ecological and person-in-environment approaches, to focus on concrete environmental issues (see, for example, Berger & Kelly, 1993; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Park, 1996; Rogge, 1994; Soine, 1987). In the first dozen years of the new millennium, environmental social work scholarship continued with some of the earlier themes such as impacts of environmental contaminants, environmental injustices, and broadly articulated suggestions for intervention. However, scholars began looking to new directions such as exploring sources of the fractured human-nature relationship, spirituality, and the perils of neoliberalism and deregulation (Besthorn, 2001; Coates, 2003; Dominelli, 2012; Dylan, 2012a; Dylan & Coates, 2012; Mary, 2008; Zapf, 2009). Much of this more recent environmental scholarship focused on theoretical dimensions of social work and the environment, offering theorized suggestions; but there continued to be an obvious lack of literature rooted in practice or based on intervention examples. This is problematic since the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (2008) states:

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice. (section 6.01)

Further, the Canadian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (2005) states:

Social workers promote social fairness and the equitable distribution of resources, and act to reduce barriers and expand choice for all persons, with special regard for those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or have exceptional needs.... Social workers promote social development and environmental management in the interests of all people. (p. 5)

If social workers are to advocate successfully for environments conducive to the general welfare of all people, promote social justice, and ensure more equitable distribution of resources, as well as just environmental management, then environmental social work scholarship must get beyond theorizing and suggestions itemizing broad responses, and provide instead illustrative examples of interventions and alternative practices. Fortunately, the trend in very recent environmental scholarship has done just this (see, for example, Heinonen & Drolet, 2012; Dylan, 2013; Lysack, 2013; Ross, 2013; Shepard, 2013; Stehlik, 2013). Education, in particular the classroom setting, provides a wonderful opportunity to explore and share experiments with environmental social work praxis.

Given the widespread attention to climate change and the associated mounting student interest in environmental concerns and eco-justice, environmentally-themed classroom content has become increasingly relevant. Many social work scholars, including this author, are writing about environmental issues and integrating related themes into their courses. This paper discusses the development of the "Ecology and Social Justice" elective that the author taught in the School of Social Work at St. Thomas University in 2013. Designed with students from rural areas in mind, this elective was developed with a deliberate focus on environmental injustice and

environmental racism not only to emphasize these realities broadly, but also to highlight the many ways social work can provide multilevel forms of intervention. Because St. Thomas University is located in Fredericton, essentially a rural hub for surrounding communities in the province of New Brunswick, there was a need to cast course content in the light of rurality. This is reflected in scholarly readings, materials, and activities that have a planned focus on environmental themes relating to non-urban and rural spaces.

Rural Context

Although St. Thomas University is located in the capital of the province of New Brunswick, Fredericton possesses rural qualities. Rurality is a slippery concept eluding precise definition (Baffour, 2011; Daley, 2010); but even from a purely quantitative perspective, Fredericton comes close to fitting the rural category when using the population standard of 50,000 (Daley, 2010). Census data from 2011 record Fredericton's population size as 56,224 (Statistics Canada, 2012a), which is smaller than many urban centers. Indeed, the entire province of New Brunswick has a population of only 751,171 (Statistics Canada, 2012b), which is smaller than many urban centers. New Brunswick, therefore, is a province comprising primarily rural spaces, and its capitol, by extension, mirrors this rural reality in a variety of ways.

First, two of the most salient political issues engaging Fredericton citizens involve rural events. One is the organized resistance to hydraulic fracturing in which activists from Fredericton and the surrounding area have gone into regions targeted for resource extraction largely as Indigenous allies to resist developments of this kind. Also of environmental concern is a recent decision by the Premier of New Brunswick to approve a forest strategy promising more public lands to the forest industry. This plan justified sacrificing formerly protected natural spaces with the assurance of job creation. Informed citizens recognized this jobs-versus-the-environment rhetoric as spurious (Brecher, 2014; White, 1996), and Fredericton and surrounding community activists who fear the forest strategy's devastating effects on watercourses, wetlands, critical habitats, and wildlife species mounted various resistance efforts.

Second, many students in the School of Social Work at St. Thomas University come from rural regions. Several have even reported that Fredericton is the largest center in which they have resided, and others expressed an interest in returning to a smaller community. Students in our program often choose field placements in rural areas, and "Rural Social Work" is commonly chosen as an elective. This fact is telling because the social work program at St. Thomas University allows students to choose from numerous electives, but because of many compulsory courses, only four are in the curriculum. That one of the four electives chosen would be Rural Social Work suggests students recognize the need for knowledge and theory pertaining to rural practice in order to provide skilled professional social work services not only in the province in general, but also in Fredericton since many New Brunswick rural residents travel to Fredericton for social services.

Third, like any region having a sizeable population, Fredericton is not homogenous. Fredericton has its own unique "cultural composition, history, and values" (Rhodes, 2012). Indigenous and Acadian cultures coexist with the dominant culture, and a multicultural faction, though still small, is growing. There is also an official bilingual policy (English and French) that pertains within Fredericton and throughout the Province of New Brunswick. To categorize

Fredericton as an urban center simply because its population is approximately 6,000 people over the arbitrary 50,000 person limit would be to overlook the many nuances here described, oversimplify the rural-urban dichotomy, and miss the element of rural-urban blending that characterizes most communities (Daley, 2010). While Fredericton mimics, in some respects, qualities of large urban centers, such as offering a hub of services to surrounding communities and possessing a variety of resources and networks that draw commuters and consumers to its center, Fredericton also has many of the hallmarks of rural settings, for example, limited diversity, shortage of jobs, deficient anonymity, and dual relationships (Phillips, Quinn, & Heitkamp, 2010).

For social work students at St. Thomas University and in other non-urban institutions of higher learning, environmental issues need to be made relevant by discussing them in the context of rural realities. Climate change and other environmental challenges, notably those associated with resource extraction and agriculture, have differential effects on rural communities versus more urban centers. For example, climate change is expected to have “[m]ajor future rural impacts...in the near term and beyond through impacts on water availability and supply, food security, and agricultural incomes.... These impacts are expected to disproportionately affect the welfare of the poor in rural areas...” (IPCC, 2014, p. 19). Because extraction industries such as mining and forestry typically occur in more rural spaces, often with profound environmental effects on local communities, people living in these areas experience unequal exposure to environmental “bads” (Bullard, 2005; Haluza-DeLay, O’Riley, Cole, & Agyeman, 2009). Indigenous peoples are multiply burdened, contending not only with contaminants and the boom and bust phenomenon of extraction industries, but also the persistence of colonial forces present in negotiation processes (Dylan, Smallboy, & Lightman, 2013), the continued unilateral assertion of state sovereignty (Turner, 2006) surrounding extraction enterprises, the foreignness of dominant-culture epistemological and ontological understandings, and the assault on cultural lifeways that such industrial developments often represent (Dylan, Smallboy, & Lightman, 2013; McGregor, 2009; Lawrence, 2009).

In New Brunswick, Canada, the province in which I live, these tensions were underscored when Mi’kmaq persons from Elsipogtog First Nation initiated a months-long battle against SWN Resources Canada, a company desiring to do hydraulic fracturing in Elsipogtog territory. The standoff organized by the First Nation protestors was due to the perception that SWN had not sufficiently consulted with the First Nation, which can constitute a form of environmental injustice and environmental racism: injustice because the Crown has a duty to consult First Nations and this needs to be done in good faith; environmental racism because a hydraulic fracturing venture runs the risk of contaminating water and lands used by the First Nation. Themes of environmental racism and environmental justice, at the core of so many environment-related protests, formed the cornerstone of the Ecology and Social Justice elective I developed.

The Course

This course was offered in the final term of a post-degree BSW program, and the students possessed well-developed social action skills. The course used a pedagogical model that offered skills to social work students interested in environmental issues. The course reflected the moral imperative issued by United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, that humankind act with “conscientious foresight” regarding the “existential challenge” of the contemporary eco-crisis

(United Nations News Centre, 2012). As such, the course was designed with a notable “ethic of change” (see Hancock, Waites, & Kledaras, 2012, p. 5) orientation having a focus on structural forces and the need to rectify economic and social inequities. Students explored systematically, critically, and strategically a number of environmental theoretical and practical approaches as theorized, for the most part, by social work scholars and activists. The purpose of the course was to promote the development and strengthening of knowledge and skills for environmental social work practice, and integrate new and enhanced learning into personal and professional understanding and activities. It was thought that, through this process, the course would enable students to become effective environmental social work advocates, activists, and allies able to facilitate intra- and intergenerational equity, involving consideration of environmental rights for present and future generations (Hiskies, 2008; Westra, 2008).

Course development was strongly influenced by Giroux’s (2011) concept of critical pedagogy that emphasizes the “radical tradition in order to reclaim a legacy of critical thinking that refuses to decouple education from democracy, politics from pedagogy, and understanding from public intervention” (p. 141). Class time was spent examining important environmental theories, both persisting and emerging, and applying selected aspects of these theories to a specific issue on which the students and instructor as a class would take collective action. This was an attempt to use the “tradition of critical thought” to promote “the importance of investing in the political as part of a broader effort to revitalize notions of democratic citizenship, social justice, and the public good (Giroux, 2011, p. 141). The first two class meetings provided an overview of environmental social work and served to situate environmental concerns in social work praxis. What followed were a series of class meetings having a single environmental social work theme that would be discussed based on readings and guest lectures (by authors of the weekly readings) in the context of both local and global, and rural and urban realities. For example, weekly class themes in the order they were examined included the reworking of the person-in-environment foundational metaphor and the centrality of place in human identity; the relevance of deep ecology to social work theory and practice; the contributions of ecofeminism to social work theory and practice; the adoption of sustainability concepts and sustainable development by social work; environmental justice as conceived of and applied by social workers; environmental social work ethics; rights discourse and environmental issues; ecospirituality through a decidedly social work lens; queer ecology; the role of social work in disaster relief; and green social work.

The course was designed to be consistent with the tradition of critical thought as articulated by Giroux (2011) and included the following objectives:

- gaining a breadth of theoretical knowledge that can inform professional social work practice in general, and environmental social work practice in particular;
- being able to work with environmental considerations at all levels of practice, including direct, community, and policy;
- acquiring an understanding of the various forces responsible for creating the structural inequities underpinning a range of environmental injustices locally, nationally, and globally;

- learning a variety of strategies for resisting and combating environmental degradation, environmental injustice, and environmental racism; and
- developing the ability to integrate a number of theories and strategies into a collective action designed to raise consciousness and militate against environmental racism.

Student evaluations for the course were based on two assignments. One was a conventional essay assignment where students selected one (or more) environmental theory(ies) and critically discussed its(their) application to a social justice issue of their choice. The second assignment involved a collective action in which all class members worked collaboratively to organize a consciousness raising, issue-spotlighting event, held at the university's largest auditorium. This event involved a panel discussion pertaining to environmental racism and environmental injustice. The class invited two internationally recognized activists, one Roma and one First Nation, to be panelists. These two groups were settled upon because of the egregious treatment, past and present, of First Nations peoples in Canada, and the similar treatment of Romani peoples in Europe. There was sufficient experiential likeness between the two groups to have thematic cohesion during the panel. For example, both groups have experienced marginalization, systematic attempts at eradication, and persecution. Both groups also continue to experience many forms of oppression apparent in a range of health indicators, economic conditions, education levels, and unacceptable environmental conditions (McGarry, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2010; Stauber & Vago, 2007). Moreover, First Nations and Romani peoples have a considerable demographic presence in both urban and non-urban spaces, making their environmental realities and challenges consistent with this elective's focus.

Each class meeting was structured as a seminar, allotting time for academic discussion of readings, invited guest lecturers, and planning for the panel event. For all but two classes, I managed to organize having the authors whose articles were highlighted readings join the class either in person or by Skype, a technology which constructively expanded the possibility for "education programming without spatial or temporal limits" (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014, p. 257). This approach provided students an opportunity to hear leading international scholars in the field of environmental social work, ask them questions regarding their articles, and engage in real time with those shaping the environmental social work discourse. The authors, activists, and scholars who joined the class included Kimberly Wasserman, Director, Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, Chicago, to discuss grassroots activism and environmental justice, Gina Csanyi-Robah, Executive Director, Roma Community Centre, Toronto, to discuss Romani realities; Professor Fred Besthorn, University of Wichita, to share insights on deep ecology; Professor Jef Peeters, Leuven University College, to highlight the usefulness of sustainable development to environmental social work endeavors; Professor Frank Tester, University of British Columbia, to discuss environmental social work in the context of human rights; Professor John Coates to frame environmental justice and eco-spirituality in a postmodern paradigm; Professor Catriona Sandilands, York University, to discuss queer ecologies and situate environmental understandings in a sexualized topography; and Professor Lena Dominelli, Durham University, to shed light on her concept of "green social work." To some extent, students were also able to see, through a variety of perspectives from these international scholars, how environmental issues in an increasingly globalized world are intricately connected yet also contoured and forged by different historical and contemporary realities.

While the Council of Social Work Education identified field education as the signature pedagogy of social work, the arguments proffered by Larrison and Korr (2013) are more compelling and unequivocally more consistent with the author's experience: "[F]ield education is a necessary but not sufficient component of our signature pedagogy. Instead...social work's signature pedagogy occurs in all learning exchanges, in our implicit and explicit curricula, and in both the classroom and the field" (p. 204). This elective, *Ecology and Social Justice*, had signature pedagogy throughout, from the critical analysis of readings on the syllabi, to engaged critical discussion, to team-based experiential learning, to a kind of radical community practice. All of these elements represented an intricate interweaving of the very elements essential to performing the role of social work practitioner.

Through experiential team-based learning, students enrolled in the course were able to assume responsibility for many dimensions of the learning process, operating as active learners, which many students have identified as invaluable to learning about social justice issues (Robinson, Robinson, & McCaskill, 2013; Mapp, 2013). Consistent with the adult learning model (Freire, 2000), the author functioned as a co-learner (Jardine, 2005) and co-constructor of in-class experiences (Besthorn, 2007), power sharing with the students (Kilgour, 2004) and becoming a member of the collective. Students made most of the decisions (usually through consensus; occasionally resorting to a democratic process) regarding how best to plan for the panel event, and I assumed my role in the collective while still facilitating class discussions in a style that did not abdicate my responsibilities as teacher. While teaching in this manner was invigorating, it also posed new challenges, foregrounding multiple complexities in the student-professor relationship, and required attending to ever-present power dynamics and differentials in the classroom (Hodge, 2011). The navigation of this challenging reality was ameliorated by being mindful of matters related to classroom safety and related issues, making use of classroom agreements (norms), attempting to model skilful communication, being transparent about the facilitator role, encouraging critical thinking, and drawing on the robust disciplines of social work with groups and adult learning (Dylan, 2012b).

Discussion

Because this elective was designed to function largely as a collective, students had a tremendous influence on how the course evolved and substantial input with respect to activities occurring both within and outside class. The success of the panel event depended on considerable planning, including choosing the panelists, raising sufficient funds to bring them to Fredericton, developing posters and brochures, advertising the event, reaching out to the community, and more. Prior to the course, I was in contact with an international Romani activist and discussed the possibility of her being a panelist. This arrangement was approved by the collective and the task of determining how many and who the other panelists should be remained. After a couple of weeks we settled on having a panel of two. One panelist had a set speaker's fee and the other offered to speak at no cost, provided travel and accommodation expenses were covered. As a collective we decided, for the sake of equity and respecting expertise, to furnish this second speaker with an honorarium. Also, the panelist with the set fee offered to provide a workshop in addition to the panel talk, so the collective then began organizing and advertising for an "Environmental Injustice Workshop" focusing on grassroots activism. This focus was well suited to the built-in rural theme of the course, as many local activists and socially-minded academics are regularly involved in grassroots activism to protect

local peoples, communities, spaces and places from corporate threat, such as the hydraulic fracturing and deforestation plans discussed earlier. As well as decisions of this kind, students had to determine the best avenues for fundraising. In this process they demonstrated remarkable initiative that was fostered by the flexible nature of the course format, which required active, engaged learning and concomitantly enhanced complex connection with more academic classroom material (Grise-Owens, Cambron, & Valade, 2010). Conceptualizing the classroom as a site of collaboration where students and facilitator were “coevolvers and cocreators of the best possible [outcomes] envisaged” (Dylan & Coates, 2012, p. 139) led to a variety of creative approaches for fundraising and consciousness raising. For example, in order to fundraise, promote the event, and consciousness raise, the collective organized a bake sale, yard sale, documentary film nights, and information sharing in other St. Thomas University courses. One student who is artistically talented offered to make a painting that was auctioned with the proceeds going to the event. Because the collective anticipated costs associated with the panel event, such as travel, accommodation, and speakers fees, would not be adequately covered by these particular fundraising activities, the group also worked collaboratively to solicit funds from local businesses, agencies, networks, organizations, and administration. I also applied for and was awarded a conference grant. With these combined efforts, sufficient money was raised and the panel event was a success: The invited speakers provided compelling narratives and evocative illustrative examples of environmental racism and injustice in the lives of First Nations and Romani peoples while also examining these inequities more broadly. Through this planning process, students gained greater efficacy in collaborative, collectivist, community organizing and engagement skills through the joining of critical social justice education and social action (Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006). Experiences of these kind help students recognize the influence they have as agents of change and potentially strengthen a continued propensity toward social change endeavors (Hancock et al., 2012).

The course was not without its challenges, however. The two main concerns reported involved the final assignment (the panel discussion and workshop), and the structure of the course. Students were understandably worried about what would happen if insufficient funds were raised to hold the panel discussion. They were told that success was not measured by the actual holding of the event, but the application of knowledge, skills and talents toward the objective of bringing greater awareness to St. Thomas University and beyond, of environmental injustice and environmental racism. That is, this aspect of the course was largely process rather than outcome oriented, a characteristic of experiential learning (Bellefeuille, 2006). The concern regarding course structure seemed to issue from a general discomfort with a fairly non-traditional course format and this understandably produced some resistance (Grise-Owens et al., 2010). Some of this discomfort can also be ascribed to “adaptive anxiety” (Shulman, 2005, p. 57) typical of learning associated with a signature pedagogy. Although I had not anticipated this resistance because of the general enthusiasm about the course and the palpable student investment in the various undertakings, I was open to receiving this feedback and certainly would invite more dialogue around this issue if I were to have the opportunity to teach a course of this kind again.

Overall, the course was evaluated well with students expressing appreciation for the learning opportunities provided by this elective. Qualitative student feedback emphasized different dimensions of the course that students found valuable. For example, one student enjoyed “being able to read an article and then come to class and have the opportunity to listen to

and ask questions of the author.... It was such a unique experience that I've never had the opportunity to do before." This sentiment was echoed by most students in the course. Another student described how "the process of putting an event together was an interesting experience" that "taught a lot of skills." Another student expressed how this elective "allowed students to think critically in more than just a superficial sense—to challenge assumptions fully and explore tensions inherent in social, ecological, and structural social work."

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to share the author's response both to our profession's delineated social justice aims and an unequivocal aspect of the contemporary eco-crisis through the development of a course that used a critical, transformative, liberatory, praxis-oriented education model with a view to raising environmental justice awareness in a rural setting. The hope is there are elements of value in this sharing that may be of use for the future development of radical and rural social work courses generally, and environmental social work courses more specifically.

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