

Sustainability, survival and engagement: implications for curriculum and pedagogy in social professions

Trudi Cooper*

Rowena H. Scott[†]

*Edith Cowan University, t.cooper@ecu.edu.au

[†]Edith Cowan University, r.scott@ecu.edu.au

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Sustainability, Survival and Engagement: Implications for Curriculum and Pedagogy in Social Professions

Trudi Cooper
Rowena H. Scott
t.cooper@ecu.edu.au
r.scott@ecu.edu.au
Edith Cowan University

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is primarily to provide conceptual discussion of the implications of social sustainability for higher education. In this paper we examine the implications of concepts of social sustainability, survival and engagement for university curriculum and pedagogy in social professions. The first part of this paper briefly discusses the implications of social sustainability for the vision of university education and curriculum in the context of current debates in higher education. The second part of this paper provides an example of successful methods to engage initially reluctant learners with analysis of political, social and ethical issues relevant to social sustainability and survival. The first part of this paper is conceptual, whilst the second part provides an example of practice.

Introduction

According to various general news items, the world faces substantial, complex and interlinked development and lifestyle challenges and problems (Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and Arts, 2009a). “Human society is currently facing unprecedented challenges associated with our interactions with the earth’s natural systems” (Stephens, Hernandez, Román, Graham & Scholz, 2008: 318). After introducing the ideas of social sustainability, this paper examines this view as the first of three premises for change towards more sustainable practices with respect to survival of our society, as we now know it.

Education has been recognised internationally as fundamentally important to the task of addressing these critical global challenges because, internationally, many current practices are destructive and we are all involved (DEWHA, 2009 a, b). Secondly, this paper outlines the special role education, and especially universities like Edith Cowan University (ECU), has in equipping students to contribute positively to social sustainability. Thirdly, this paper argues for social sustainability principles to be taught in the curriculum of social professions, so that graduates can contribute to the process whereby societal practices become less destructive than at present.

ECU aspires to put into practice principles of community sustainability. ECU policy objectives, as stated in the Sustainable Communities Action Plan 2009 include:

- Developing a heightened awareness and practice of social and environmental sustainability amongst ECU staff, students and communities.
- Embedding the principles of social and environmental sustainability as knowledge and skills into the curriculum and research programs. This presentation interprets and explains what these statements might mean in terms of curriculum and pedagogy.

The term ‘sustainability’ can be used in many different ways. The ability to persist, sustain and endure is a primary goal of sustainability. In the context of the natural world, ecological sustainable solutions are stable and enduring. A sustainable natural system adapts to changes in ways that enable the system to survive stably without purposive external interventions. In the context of social sustainability, the picture is more complex, because it is possible to envisage societies that are stable and sustainable (in the sense that they continue), but cruel or unjust. It is becoming more widely acknowledged that new approaches and processes are necessary to enhance society’s capacity to persist and endure the current environmental and social changes (Stephens et al., 2008)

The values that underpin social sustainability are closely allied to ethical pluralism (Hinman, 2008). Ethical pluralism requires acceptance of plurality of cultural perspectives, personal acceptance of diversity, and real commitment to equity and respect. Unlike ethical absolutism, pluralism argues that genuine acceptance of cultural differences is important, and also argues that it is important for people from different cultures to learn from each other. However, ethical pluralism holds that some basic values, such as respect for persons, are important to all humans, and that if cultural practices do not uphold respect for persons, then those practices should be resisted.

In industrialised countries, ‘social professions’ such as education, social work, youth work, childcare and parent support, have developed. Part of the role of these professions is to stabilise societies so that they are sustainable (in the sense that they continue). In education, the ‘hidden curriculum’ of school routines and practices, provides examples of how education functions to promote particular social values. Some of the values and methods, however, may be in conflict with a pluralist approach to ethics, if, for example, the methods used to maintain discipline fail to respect the students. Detached youth work (sometimes known as street work) has been funded to make contact with young people who avoid other adults and who are deemed to be ‘unreachable’ by other socialisation institutions like schools and youth clubs. Discussion at a recent Detached Youth Work Conference (Wigan, 2008) indicated that many detached youth workers in the UK are being pressured by employers to use their relationship with young people to police their behaviour. Since the beginning of the industrial era, the ‘social professions’ have been used to engage with selected populations to promote social stability, sometimes, in ways that are contrary to the interests of the target population (White, 1990).

Within each of the social professions, ‘critical’ streams have emerged (for example, radical social work, and critical education) arguing that social stability should not be achieved at the cost of injustice. Values promoted by ECU, like ‘respect’ and ‘integrity’ in practice support the concept of social sustainability within a pluralist ethical framework. A society aligned to sustainability practices would be just and caring, responsive and enduring. This paper now examines each of the three main premises underlying the urge for change towards for the sustainability agenda.

Survival and Social Sustainability

This section illustrates some of the challenges that have emerged in modern society and illustrates complexity, speed of social change and unpredictability of social outcomes in technically advanced societies.

The second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of post-industrial society in developed countries. Post-industrial society is characterised by hyper-individualism, suburbanisation and loss of community, loss of industrial employment and loss of working class organisations. Post-industrialism has been associated with a revival of neo-liberal free market economics. The rate of social and technological change increased dramatically. Several unforeseen events occurred. The population structure changed first in industrialised countries and then in developing countries. Malthus (1826) had predicted that human population would increase at a faster rate than food supply, and that population growth would ultimately be controlled by famine, but during this period the opposite occurred. A low birth rate and greater longevity meant that average age increased and family size fell. The green revolution made food cheap. Affluence increased at the same time as family size decreased. Keynes (1930) predicted that within 100 years we would no longer need to work more than 15 hours per week, and yet, professionals in 21st century Australia work longer hours than their parents. Social mores, traditional family structure and life patterns changed within two generations. Gender roles changed and racial discrimination became illegal, but did not disappear. Successful treatments were developed for many illnesses and technologies became available to extend human life, sometimes without adding quality, but AIDS emerged reminding us that not all ills could be cured. Australia became a 'knowledge economy', Higher education was 'massified' to support this change, but at the same time per capita funding to universities was reduced.

During the second half of the 20th century, the public first became aware that there were limits to growth imposed by the finite nature of the world's resources. Ecological problems began to emerge as serious issues. However, this awareness had no effect on neo-liberal economic policy and the quest for growth. For the first time, the public could see the effects of famine in third world countries, of genocide, war and nuclear explosions broadcast on TV screens, but for many this knowledge reinforced a sense of helplessness.

The 21st century has brought further changes that emphasise the interconnectedness of people across the globe. Many forms of digital media, like Mobile phones, Internet usage and email, have become commonplace across most of the population in many countries leading to changes in the ways that people in affluent countries communicate and socialise. Even rural life has been transformed by communication technologies. Terrorism has replaced communism as the perceived threat to Western liberal democracy, and religious fundamentalism has challenged secular values of liberal democracy from within, especially in the USA. Climate change has become a serious political concern with some countries beginning to take action to cut carbon dioxide emissions. The global financial crisis has again raised questions about the compatibility of capitalism and democracy, and the viability of capitalism in a no-growth economy. Social sustainability is not the same as social stability or social stagnation. Changes to European society since the Middle Ages have illustrated that social change is inevitable in any society, and that some forms of ecologically and socially sustainable society are not desirable from an ethical pluralist perspective. A purpose of this overview has been to illustrate how many past predictions about the future have been inaccurate and to illustrate the very rapid rate of change in present day society. Few people could have accurately predicted even ten years ago, how politics and

technology have changed everyday life. It is clear that the future we are facing will not be like anything that has gone before. More than ever, the world needs people who respond creatively to the complexity of the current social challenges to work together for a socially sustainable, just and caring world. As university educators, we argue that our role is to help students to develop these skills.

Education and Social Sustainability

This section illustrates some of the hope and expectation that education is fundamentally important to addressing the critical global challenges we all face (DEWHA, 2009 a, b).

In the 18th century, the role of cultural stabilisation for masses undertaken by church, and education had only a minor role for elite within a religious framework and was primarily transmissive. Since the industrial revolution, the role of education in social sustainability has increased and education has been used both to transmit cultural values and to prepare people for social change. Traditionally, educators (believed they) understood the social conditions into which graduates would emerge.

In the 19th century after the industrial revolution and migration of young people to urban centres, the church became ineffective as an institution of cultural stabilisation with the urban poor. Compulsory education was adopted as a vehicle for cultural stabilisation to inculcate values of industrial discipline upon the masses and to impose religious ethical indoctrination. Education was also seen as a necessary precursor to universal suffrage, as a necessary condition for social democracy. Youth work and welfare services provided moral and material support to cultural stabilisation programs. Alongside state and church sponsored educational processes, a few organisations like the Workers Education Association in England, provided transformative adult education, which helped students critique dominant social and political structures and develop alternative responses to social issues.

In the 20th century, cultural stabilisation and cohesion was an important role of both education and social professionals such as youth work. Welfare services provided material welfare, and in a secular society, education and youth work promoted the values of liberal nationalism, liberalism and social democracy. Education promoted these values in the curriculum through civics and social studies and through the hidden curriculum, promoted in assemblies and other school gatherings.

It is less clear how education will function in the 21st century, and whether education will still be important for cultural stabilisation. It is also less clear how change will occur in a globalised post-industrial age. This raises questions about how the goals of education change. Many educational goals assume possession of accurate knowledge of the likely form of the world that graduates will enter. The examples in the previous section illustrate that we cannot be confident that we know how the world will be, even ten years from now. This means that we must prepare graduates to be able to respond constructively and flexibly to uncertainty, to develop good analytic and critical skills, and to learn how to learn, to become autodidacts, to teach themselves what they need to know. More than anything, we need to help students to make sense of issues and to remain positive when faced with uncertainty.

Many potential social challenges compete for priority:

- Ecological problems (mass extinction, global warming and global destruction, end of carbon age)
- Economic problems, especially doubts about the compatibility of present forms of capitalism in a no-growth economy
- How to manage the transition to a stable or reducing global human population
- Unresolved socio-medical issues such as the increase in mental illness, extension of life without quality of life,
- Unresolved social issues such as social fragmentation, loss of community, cultural fragmentation, global inequalities,
- Unprecedented rate of technological change, with implications for social relationships, health, recreation and leisure

To summarise, in the 19th century dominant forms of education used education for cultural transmission. In the 20th century cultural transmission remained an important purpose, in conjunction with personal development goals. In the 21st century, we argue, social sustainability in an uncertain world requires transformative education.

Curriculum in Social Professions

This section illustrates how many of our current social practices can be destructive (DEWHA, 2009 a, b). This observation applies equally to emergent social trends and to interventions intended to mitigate social ills.

Future leaders of social professions will need sufficient broad understanding of social and political processes to inform analysis of new situations because how society will change is uncertain. For example, the scale, speed and impact of social media sites emerging in the last five years was not predicted 10 years ago. Changes to some policing methods have resulted in young people no longer present being on the street. While previously, detached youth workers would contact them there, now, they are more contactable through Facebook. Should youth workers work online? What procedures should be used if they do? What additional skills, policy and safeguards do they require? What research is needed to inform this decision? Will it be effective use of resources? Future leaders of the profession need to make informed judgements about these issues and to develop appropriate evaluation and monitoring processes.

Reflective practice is an essential tool for life-long learning to link social analysis of new situations with implications for changes to policy and professional practice. Since the 1980s most professional courses have been required to show that graduates are competent. At best, competency based assessment may prove possession of certain necessary skills, but because competencies based curricula assume certain historic understandings of the profession (revised every 10 to 15 years), it is unlikely that a competency based skill set would adequately equip graduates for employment. At worst, competency based assessment is overly reductionist in its approach (Davies & Durkin, 1991). A better approach is to combine practice skills with critical thinking skills analytical skills and reflective practice.

Pedagogical Issues of Embedding Social Sustainability Principles

Critical pedagogy emphasises the need to start from students' interests and perception of their needs so they can see the relevance of the educational process in terms of their own experience, but critical pedagogy argues that the role of education is for the teacher to facilitate the student to extend their own horizons, enabling them to gain new insights and analyses of situations. There is sometimes tension between these two requirements, because the student does not know what they do not know, which might be useful to a broader understanding of the world. The issue of education for social sustainability poses some particular difficulties.

1. Although students and lecturers know intellectually that society is changing rapidly and that this will continue and possibly accelerate, most students have not processed the implications of this for their lives or for their education. They need sufficient understanding of change to be able to analyse social changes and develop appropriate professional responses
2. Many students still have expectations that their studies will provide them with 'singular right answers', yet as the rate of social change increases, it becomes less and less possible to provide singular correct answers. These expectations arise partly because some assessment systems in school and TAFE reward students for responding singularly even where multiple interpretations are possible. Some university students seem unprepared to grapple with uncertainty or contradictory expert opinions and beliefs.
3. Similarly, some students expect 'recipes' that tell them in detail how to respond in any situation. This expectation may be reinforced by their labour market experiences. In retail and hospitality, many employees are trained very precisely to respond to customers in a pre-determined way. They are provided with a set 'script' for every situation they encounter. Whilst this method may be effective for quality assurance in fast food outlets, it does not provide a useful blueprint for students who will need to make judgements about how to respond to unfamiliar complex situations, and in this context students need to explore the limitations of formulaic responses.
4. The key pedagogic issue is how to equip all students with the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to make decisions based upon recognition of environmental, social, cultural and economic implications, and to do this without causing loss of hope.

Example of Practice

One of us teaches youth work students in the Bachelor of social science. One of the compulsory units teaches different political ideologies and the implications for policy and professional practice in youth work. The unit examines various political beliefs about human nature, society, and an 'ideal' future and explores how various world views give rise to various policy goals and various service funding priorities. Because this unit requires students to understand and examine various ways of seeing the world and interpreting the meaning of events and because most students have little prior knowledge of politics, and often no prior interest, this second year unit is potentially difficult to teach. There is also a risk that lecturers might consciously or unconsciously attempt to impose upon students their own personal political agenda.

To enhance student engagement, the first 15-20 minutes of each lecture is presented theatrically. To engage students in the various ideologies, the lecturer dresses up appropriately

for each ideology, delivers a highly partisan political address from the chosen ideological perspective on some key issues, and sings a song that summarises the particular worldview. This ‘infotainment’ successfully engages students, who arrive on time so as not to miss the performance. They often remember the song, and that helps them retain key information.

To address the issue of potential indoctrination, different ideologies are examined each week. Each ideology is initially presented from within its own assumptions, and subsequently critiqued from the perspective of other ideologies. A measure of the success of this approach is that students often state towards the end of the unit that they are unable to discern the lecturer’s true political affiliations.

The infotainment is followed by a PowerPoint presentation and YouTube clips illustrate policy implications. Questions are posed so that students analyse content, debate and critique the ideology and perspectives on policy during the lecture session. They further discuss applications of the perspective and implication for policy during tutorials.

This approach uses key features of critical pedagogy. Firstly, an important assertion of critical pedagogy is that students should be given opportunities to resist new ideas (Hope & Timmel, 1997). This means that the unit materials should not attempt to dictate student values. The unit enables students to practice analytical skills, identifying strengths and weaknesses of different perspectives, and consequences of different world-views. Secondly, the purpose of the unit is enables students identify, challenge and explore their own political beliefs and integrate perspectives to their concepts of good practice. It would be unhelpful to this process if the lecturer made their own political commitments clear. To facilitate the exploration process, in assessments, students contrast different perspectives on a topical issue without requiring them to commit to a particular position. In this way, the focus remains upon exploration of different value positions and avoids premature foreclosure. Also, the lecturer attempts to make connections between students’ interests and unit content, encouraging students’ interest in the subject matter rather than presentation of information. The lecture covers only small amounts of information as students have access to all materials including quizzes and YouTube links on Blackboard.

Some aspects of critical pedagogy are not possible to implement in a university setting. For example, the university context requires a pre-defined approach, whereas a critical pedagogy approach would allow the ‘curriculum’ to be determined by the interests and direction of the group. Similarly, university assessment is not compatible with some aspects of a critical pedagogy approach to education.

Conclusions

Primary education was the ‘cultural stabilisation’ fix of the industrial age in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the post-industrial age, higher education may provide ‘cultural stabilisation’ in a post-industrial society if it equips students with the knowledge and skills to make decisions based on their environmental, social, cultural, political and economic implications and this is the goal of sustainability in education. The post industrial age requires a different kind of cultural stabilisation because social processes are changing rapidly and the future is unpredictable. At present, the best contribution that higher education can make is to ensure that graduates understand social and political changes and are able to lead others to develop constructive

responses to new social challenges. A modified form of critical pedagogy provides an effective way forward in a university setting to achieve the goal of social sustainability based upon ethical pluralist values.

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