

The New Color Is Green: Social Work Practice and Service-Learning

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Abstract: *Attention to saving the environment is gaining momentum daily. Citizens have a fundamental right to protect the environment from harm due to human activities. The profession of social work has a role to play in greening and sustaining the environment. The inclusion of this content in social work courses is a natural fit given the profession's person-in-environment perspective which emphasizes the relationship between individuals, their behavior and the environment and advocacy for preservation of human welfare and human rights. Participatory environmentalism considers the role of community members in demonstrating their civic responsibility toward preservation of the natural environment and resources. Social work students must be encouraged to accept vital leadership roles that address environmental concerns in addition to serving client populations. A community practice course which includes a service-learning requirement chose "greening" as a theme. Students worked with communities to identify and implement semester-long "green" projects.*

Keywords: *Service-learning, environmental concerns, greening community practice*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues cross micro, mezzo and macro levels of social work practice and are begging for increased attention. Growing concerns for the environment are positioning social workers and educational institutions alike to be proactive. Environmental conservation efforts have been documented since the 19th century (Cronin & Kennedy, 1999), and recent decades of public consciousness have pushed the environment to a more recognized societal value, one that must be acknowledged and preserved. Generally, global citizens believe they have a fundamental right to protect themselves and their communities from technological intrusions and environmental abuse. Thus, they are entitled to clean air, clean land, clean water, good health, safe transportation and water, among others amenities (Cronin & Kennedy, 1999; McKinnon, 2008; National Association of Social Workers, 2009; Scabecoff, 2000; Schwartz, 2006). More citizens also believe they have a fundamental right to protect the environment from the harm of excessive and careless activities.

Students are among these citizens who have a growing interest in saving our environment. Expanding students' knowledge about the expansive volumes of information available and many ways they can become more engaged will contribute to saving the earth, as well as local environments within their communities. Educational institutions are responding to the increasing interest in environmental conservation and sustainability with new and expanded curricula, outreach and service efforts, policies and timely planning.

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Social workers are advocates for change and all aspects of social justice including concerns for the environment in which groups and communities exist. A healthy environment is viewed as a human right and is specifically related to human dignity and nondiscrimination in a socially just world (Wronka, 2008). The future health and survival of humans is directly impacted by the consciousness of all humans regarding the global world. Increasing students' awareness of their role in protecting and saving our environment is critical for the future. Internationally known environmentalist Jones (2009) and Hembd and Silberstein (2011) note the importance of engagement by students. Jones further suggests that students' energy and enthusiasm have already "turned up the heat" in the movement to prevent catastrophic climate change. Most important is his observation that the "sky is the limit" for the next generation's leadership role. This paper discusses the inclusion of environmental issues, specifically "greening" in a Community Practice Social Work course. Students completed "green" projects as part of the course requirements. This course was also designated as a service-learning course and satisfied the Core Curriculum requirement.

GREENING, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND SOCIAL WORK LINKS

Although historically primary attention has been given to social, cultural and economic issues, more social workers now give consideration to the natural environment. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2009), concern for the environment is a critical component of the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective. The PIE concept emphasizes the relationship between individuals, their behavior and the environment, the social ecology. Thus, this perspective begs for a holistic consideration of one's functioning in the environment. Mounting environmental preservation concerns require an emphatic response from social workers, according to Park (1996). Evidence of a consciousness of the connection between the environment and social work exists in responses and reactions to population growth, synthetic organic compounds and changes to the Earth's surface. As humans regard the Earth and her components as an artist's tapestry, Park (1996) correctly suggests a need to eliminate the partition separating the artist's studio and everyday life. Social work must build on its historical roots and, therefore, is a natural advocate of environmental preservation and sustainability. Social work has historically been dedicated to the betterment and preservation of human welfare (Berger & Kelly, 1993). They further identify a new ethic that human societies need, one that is consistent with an emerging awareness of our connectedness to the natural world and our understanding of nature's limits of tolerance. Updated information regarding human connection to the environment piques increasing interest as humans realize the responsibility they have to address this concern. An extension of these connections to nature is critical. Human behaviors can impact the situations client populations face from global warming to health issues and from technological and manufacturing to employment issues. Jones (2010) and the United Nations Environment Programme (2000) indicate environmental changes affect human development options, with poor populations disproportionately impacted. Therefore, the robustness of social work as a helping profession positions itself as a natural connect to the environment, ecological preservation and humanity. This achievement is inevitable if social work is to maintain its relevance as a profession during this time of escalating environmental crises. This

transformation pushes social workers to better understand ways in which not only economic but also environmental factors affect the lived reality of the people with whom they work. Reformed curricula through connections made between theory, practice and environmental issues will shift the profession to real-time expansion and integration of environmental knowledge and engagement (Jones, 2010; McKinnon, 2008).

Global citizens are more aware today of the impact of the environment on their daily lives and the extent to which their daily survival is affected. What are the rights of citizens regarding the environment? Robert Kennedy Jr. states:

I recognized that environment is not something distant and inaccessible to most Americans. It is not an issue that can be separated out and dealt with on its own. The environment is our neighborhood, our community. It is our quality of life. I began to see the environment not as a privilege that was part of my affluent background, but as a right for every American, one that was being subverted by greedy, powerful, and corrupt interest in our society (as cited in Cronin & Kennedy, 1999, pg. 116).

Expansive personal consumption and possession drive habits where individual fulfillment is addressed without consideration of consequences of this behavior. Shabecoff (2000) believes this thinking springs from the systems, institutions, values, and habits of thought created by humans through the centuries to manage, sustain, and order our civilization. Efforts to establish environmental standards have a long history including smoke abatement laws in the 11th century to regulatory actions and more recent policies including the U.S.'s Clean Air Act, Clean Water and Waste Management Acts and international efforts such as Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. Each of these regulations has addressed the rights of industry, as well as citizens, and has led to disclosures by industry while establishing far-reaching environmental standards (Cronin & Kennedy, 1999, p. 154-155).

The immensity of environmental concerns requires more than a top-down regulatory approach. Global citizens are concerned and desire to be actively engaged in ways that embrace environmental activism. In their classic study *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, The Harwood Group (1991) identified citizens' desire for involvement in civic life where they can make a difference and where they may choose to sit out a situation unless they "feel they can bring about or witness change." This notion of participatory environmentalism endears community-based action where communities actively demonstrate civic responsibility toward saving, preserving and restoring our natural environment and resources. The upsurge of environmentalism is due to societal recognition of the fact that human activities are causing a deterioration of the quality of the environment *and* that environmental deterioration in turn has negative impacts on people (Shabecoff, 2000).

As concerns for the sustainability of the environment increase, the role of education has become more involved and now includes strategies for increased public awareness and engagement. Environmental concerns are buttressed by choices citizens make about transportation patterns, water distribution, housing developments, hazardous waste disposition, energy usage, and control of air and water pollution (Park, 1996; Stapp, Wals

& Stankorb, 1996). Incorporating environmental awareness into courses highlight the importance of this topical area while providing students with opportunities to identify the role they can play in saving the environment. Stapp, Wals, and Stankorb (1996) recommend an inclusive view of environmental education, one that includes political, social, economic, and bio-physical aspects (p. 4). They further state that environmental issues involve ethical questions that focus on the sharing of the world's natural resources (p. 5). Encouraging reformation of thinking regarding the environment led Shabecoff (2000) to conclude, "It is in the classrooms, from preschool and kindergarten through graduate school, that a major part of the struggle to achieve a sustainable, livable habitat and society in the 21st century will be won or lost" (p. 70). Addressing the preservation of all natural resources is timely for citizens in an effort to become more responsible regarding current personal thinking and habits and usage for future generations. Such an educational process not only aims to better understand symptoms of current irresponsible actions but also ecological dysfunction behavior (Shabecoff, 2000, p. 178). Hoff (1997) also asserts courses in ecological science and interdisciplinary environmental studies would deepen one's understanding of how human health and differing cultures are grounded in various ecosystems. McKinnon (2008) identifies an important statement from the West Australian Council on Social Service that appeals to social workers and their role in sustainable communities: For social workers, in particular, social sustainability is a functional approach that encompasses a myriad of processes, systems, and structures, and supports the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and livable communities (p. 265).

Communities have joined the environmental justice movement and are addressing environmental insults that impact their daily lives. Most often communities confronted with these issues tend to be poor, people of color and inner city residents. These are the same communities where social workers are entrenched and deeply involved with service provision. Community sustainability must include a focus that supports development as opposed to only intervention service. A developmental approach (Homan, 2011), recognizes potential and strength which may prevent problems from happening in the first place. Social workers must work to develop communities while also responding to immediate personal needs. The link between community development and environmental justice is highlighted by Alice Shabecoff, a community developer:

Environmental protection and economic development, frequently described as contradictory goals, have in fact proved mutually reinforcing at the neighborhood level...The environmental initiatives developed by community groups are prime examples of "sustainable development," that is development that clearly takes into account three elements – the economy, ecology and community (as cited in Shabecoff, 2000, p. 60).

As an advocate for the inclusion of all local residents in the environmental movement, Jones (2008) asserts that people of color and other disadvantaged communities must be involved in the struggle for a green economy and their voice in this area can possibly lead to solutions for some of their problems (p. 109). Such involvement is also aligned with the concept of self-empowerment.

Interactions with community members allow students to focus on local environmental concerns that have immediate as well as far-reaching implications. Social interaction theory underscores the complexity of aspects of local life. The myriad of concerns in a community provide a rich source for social interactions around common concerns. Involvement in activities that meet common needs and interests give direction to collective action with local well-being as an ultimate outcome (Bridger, Brennan, & Luloff, 2011; Shandas & Messer, 2008). Addressing environmental concerns starts with awareness at the individual and community levels. Linking global concerns to local behaviors is jettisoned by increasing interdependence and requires good governance and accountability (Miekle & Green, 2011).

GREENING DEFINED

A wide range of individuals are working, thinking, buying, advocating, designing and legislating green. Greening may be based on one's personal perspective and level of awareness. Definitions of greening fit well with diverse areas (micro to macro) within the social work profession. Aspects of protecting the earth, and more specifically local communities, are deeply rooted in an understanding of greening. A global definition of greening is one's consciousness of the impact one makes on the planet. With this understanding expected behaviors include taking steps to try to minimize one's carbon footprint, or the amount of environmental damage that one causes (Middletown Thrall Library, 2008). Re-claiming and promoting an investment in the future allows local residents to reinvest in the future. Jones (2008) declares:

Greening is not just throwing away stuff not longer needed or wanted. It should be about reclaiming thrown-away communities. It should be about recycling materials to give things a second chance...Also, our youth deserve the opportunity to be a part of something promising. Across this nation, let's honor the cry of youth in Oakland, California, for "green jobs, not jails" (p. 19).

Social workers are concerned about community sustainable development on both the domestic and international fronts. Sustainable development emphasizes "the meeting of needs, as opposed to wants, and places a clear focus on intergenerational equity" (Hembd & Silberstein, 2011, p. 262). Sustainability may be defined both narrowly as the long-term protection and health of the natural environment and broadly as the triple bottom line of environmental health, economic viability, and social well-being (Calder & Dautremont-Smith, 2009). This implies making decisions on behalf of those yet unborn and unable to participate in the process but who will nonetheless be affected by the outcomes of the process. Current behavior about the environment will indeed affect future generations.

Aspects of greening also involve preserving environmental quality at all levels of society including the promotion of renewal resources that support a green economy. Social workers have daily contact with varying aspects of a green economy and its impact on client populations. For example, Stone (2010) identifies workforce development areas including transportation, energy efficiency, energy generation, construction, environment protection, and waste reduction – areas that effect vulnerable clients. Social Work

curricula must include materials that highlight environmental preservation and green economy and their impact on client population. The integration of these topics into Social Work courses promotes an increasing aware of individual responsibility to environmental preservation and the long tentacles of the ‘greening’ concept that impacts client populations in myriad ways.

Increasing students’ exposure to the importance of environmental preservation is possible through a Social Work curriculum. A description of the course the author developed follows. While student awareness of global concerns is highlighted, the immediate focus in the course described in this paper is “greening”, a short-term approach. This term-defined approach may be readily structured to the semester length of the course. Information regarding the need for more sustained interest in “greening” is emphasized. Local presenters involved in the green movement covered topics including LEED buildings, urban gardening, food deserts, work force development and green jobs, solar energy, and recycling. Throughout the semester, students are also encouraged to think about more personal habits and focus not only on immediate greening efforts but also on fostering energy independence. Students are residents of communities wherever they live, and as such they play important roles in building assets that improve their quality of life especially around social and economic issues at the local level (Robinson & Green, 2011).

THE COURSE

The course, *Community Practice*, is the macro practice course in a three-course practice sequence for the undergraduate Social Work major. The course includes content on groups, organizations, and communities inclusive of their development, structure, and effectiveness within society. Specifically, one question presented to students is: Do these entities respond to human needs that are relevant to their quality of life in culturally competent ways? Local residents are critical actors in changing conditions that exist in their communities. Students, as future macro social work practitioners, are reminded of their roles as change agents and advocates of social justice. Green innovations compel important global considerations, and social workers must find their niche in making these focal points for the profession as well. One strategy is to include greening concepts in Social Work courses. The course, *Community Practice*, requires a community project that involves a detailed study or analysis of a community/agency problem, need, or concern and addresses the implementation of a change process. The service-learning project simultaneously increases students’ awareness of community life while also providing engagement on a small scale and time-limited (one semester) basis. These activities support Jones’ (2010) suggestion that additional inclusive strategies for ecological awareness and preservation content must be forthcoming.

The impetus for choosing a theme grew out of the recognition that “greening” is critical to social work course content. The presentation of information on local and national efforts led to a realization by students that they could play a more immediate role in and address complex environmental issues. This provides the framework for identifying a course theme each year. Such a focused theme enriches opportunities for oral in-class reflection sharing and serves as the common link between projects. Projects

identified in this paper were implemented to correspond with the “Goinggreen” course theme. Students selected a community of their choosing, worked with them to identify a greening/environmental need or concern, and implement a “green” service-learning project. Project criteria included the following guidelines:

- Why is this viewed as a problem or issue?
- What is the history or background of the problem?
- What are the anticipated changes?
- With respect to community change, what are the major strengths and weaknesses of this organizing, development, or planning effort?
- What are the obvious benefits to the community?
- What is the role of a macro social worker?
- What kinds of leadership skills (strategies) do you anticipate needing to address this problem/issue?
- What are the most effective strategies used for addressing this social problem?

This course responds to the 2008 EPAS. Specifically, the following Educational Policies (EP) are identified:

- EP 2.1.4 – Engage diversity and difference in practice.
- EP 2.1.5 - Advance human rights and social and economic justice.
- EP 2.1.9 – Respond to contexts that shape practice.
- EP 2.1.10(a). – Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

The ability of social workers to recognize the many dimensions of practice and basic human rights regardless of a person’s position in society is an integral part of the profession’s skills. Social workers also recognize basic human rights, while acknowledging global interconnections of oppression and theories of justice and strategies that promote human and civil rights. Further, social work must incorporate social justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice. The engagement of social workers to substantively and affectively prepare for action with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities is highlighted as contemporary issues affect service provision to vulnerable populations. Attention to environmental preservation is critical to social work at all practice levels – micro, mezzo, and macro. Social work is a “best fit” for addressing this area given its attention to the impact of ecological issues on individuals, advocacy actions that target environmental injustices against vulnerable populations both domestically and internationally, and engagement that targets changing oppressive situations for improved future outcomes.

Selected Projects – Employing the Goinggreen Theme

Descriptions are provided for three service-learning projects that were completed during a recent semester (see Table 1, next page). Students worked with local residents to determine the “green” project that met an existing need and could be completed in a semester. Students provided reflections of their learning experience and also recorded a critical analysis of the experience in a journal.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Driving this interest in civic engagement is the belief that each student could initiate and plan an activity that would result in an identifiable level of change. Students were encouraged to give careful thought to all engagement activities and seek their meaning. Critical reflection, a decisively important exercise that employs critical thinking skills and allows for the assessment of the learning, assists this process. Further, Jones (2010) indicates this approach also allows social work students to consider socio-cultural assumptions that have led to the crisis, ways they have viewed these, and how they can actively address these concerns. Students recorded reflections of their service-learning greening project in journals that were submitted monthly. Guidelines that helped students to focus on the learning, rather than pure, straightforward descriptions of activities, were identified. Key questions used as guides for reflective writing included: What did you learn from each moment, interaction, observation, and/or activity? Were additional questions or challenges raised? What did you enjoy most? What was most challenging? Were personal goals relating to this experience met? If so, how? What’s next regarding this experience? How can the engagement continue after this experience ends? There is no absolute template for reflective writing; however, with trigger questions and critical thinking, students were able to provide in-depth analysis of the service-learning experience. Such triggers transcend a recounting of every minute interaction or activity to deeper and meaningful considerations.

In-class reflection sessions allowed students to share their weekly service-learning experiences. The sharing of students’ project experiences provided information about individual and community “greening” engagements across all practice areas – micro, mezzo and macro. These exchanges identified new and different engagement opportunities and helpful community resources. Students also used PowerPoint presentations with pictures of their project. This sharing exercise actually excited additional sharing of specific project activities that involved the planning involved, community interactions, self-evaluation, and a review of expected outcomes. Student comments indicated connections made regarding an expanded role of social workers, greening and sustainability. Even those students who were focused on careers as micro level practitioners made connections with their personal actions, workforce development and green jobs, environmental injustices and dumping, and global concerns.

Table 1. Selected Student Goingreen Service Learning Projects

Project Title	Problem	Plan	Outcome
Polluting the Community: A Concern for Dog Waste	Neighbors walking their dogs without pick up their waste. Dog waste is a public health hazard, aesthetically unappealing and causes tensions between neighbors.	The student worked with local residents who shared her concern. They concluded that the local government should be involved and requested sign postings along the main walk areas used by dog owners. Funds were also sought to purchase posts with free dog waste bags.	The student testified before the local governing council regarding this growing problem and health hazard. One councilman agreed to assist in this effort to find a funding source for posts and bags. Signs were posted. Together they are exploring funding sources and will write a grant proposal.
Greening a School's Grounds	The grounds around a local public school included dead shrubs, other plants, and barren space due to walking paths made by students. The school's principal asked the social work student to coordinate this project after learning of the student's interest in greening efforts.	The project planned to uproot existing dead and sparse plantings, cleared spaces, and plant fresh shrubbery and trees. The project sought partners including the public school system, a local conservancy, and a local foundation.	Students, teachers and the principal worked with local landscaping experts on a chilly Fall Saturday to beautify their campus and also received information on soil types, measurements, and plant placement exposure to natural elements. A more aesthetically pleasing outdoor environment was created. Other benefits included slowed storm water drainage, improved air quality, and reduced outdoor maintenance.
Promoting Greening in Residence Halls	The University had provided recycling bins specifically for paper, glass or plastic and another bin for aluminum. However, students were not using the bins, cross-mixing the items placed and throwing food products and other dirty containers in the bins.	Presentations that focused on the importance of recycling to the campus community and society were scheduled during 10 dorm floor meetings. Students would be encouraged to properly discard recyclables and were informed of implications of local actions on global communities. Resident floor counselors would publicize the meeting and encourage maximum attendance.	The attendance at each meeting was 10 - 15 students. With increased awareness students became aware of the role they could play in environmental preservation and eliminated wasting valuable recycling items by not placing them in the correct bin. The social work student stressed opportunities for exhibiting leadership qualities by championing this effort.

By employing critical reflection students consider the meaning of all aspects of the experience. After all, service-learning is a learning process with expectations of immediate and future actions. The DEAL Model (describe, examine and articulate learning) is presented as a critical template that maximizes the reflection process. Ash and Clayton (2009) note that critical reflection generates, deepens, and documents learning and further supports the learning that results from thinking about the experience. Students more readily identify the function of systems affecting the particular experience, provide more definitive responses and dissect social issues to determine future involvement (Reed-Bouley & Reed-Bouley, 2007). Thinking deeply about each experience or activity encourages more comprehensive analysis and critical thinking of each occurrence. This deeper reflective process also promotes an examination of personal values and long-held beliefs. By the end of the semester, the journal should provide a good retrospective picture of intellectual growth that occurred during the service-learning experience. Students are urged to be cognizant of their writing style, to employ all proper mechanics, and to carefully proof their journals.

CONCLUSION

The new ethic referenced earlier by Berger and Kelly (1993) identifies an emerging awareness of the connectedness to the natural world and our understanding of nature's limits on tolerance. Environmental preservation is not a fad and Kinzie (2008) declares it is fully entrenched in academic life and effects not just how students live but what they learn and as graduates how they change workplaces and neighborhood. She further notes, as does Kosnik (2008) students are advocates for curriculum infusion and research have environmental consciousness. The real challenge we face in embracing a more sustainable future, according to Orr (as cited in AASHE, 2010, p. 1), rests with our ability to educate students differently. AASHE (2010) fully supports forward thinking regarding inclusion of greening and sustainability in the curriculum and states

The fundamental problem faced in meeting the goal of education for a healthy and sustainable society for all students is that the existing curriculum in higher education has not been developed to examine how we shape a sustainable world. Much of the curriculum has been developed to provide students with an increasingly narrow understanding of disciplines, professions and jobs and is focused on specific knowledge and skills employed in the given area. What is needed is a curriculum that prepares learners for living sustainably, both professionally and personally, and that explicitly helps the learner deeply understand the interactions, inter-connections, and the consequences of actions and decisions (p. 2).

The integration of green concepts into Social Work courses is critical. Resources exist that provide assistance for this at the local, state, national and international levels. As green-aware stewards of our environment, social work students can contribute to a growing consciousness regarding the need to save the earth and the more-immediate communities in which we work. Becoming more aware of individual contributions to the green movement is another strategy by which social workers provide potential benefits to populations they serve. This knowledge encompasses energy conservation, future

employment, health and wellness awareness and other survival possibilities. Incorporating a “greening” theme in a *Community Practice* course provided students with information about the contributions they and their clients can make to advance this environmental priority. Direct engagement in the green movement through service-learning experiences provided immediate opportunities to become engaged in a hands-on experience. Encouraging students to consider their current and future contributions to environmental preservation uncovers various leadership roles as well. While working with students who were engaged in “green” projects Torrise (2010) observed enhanced leadership roles as they made contributions through community S-L placements. With increased knowledge about greening, environmental preservation and sustainability, social work students can use this information to better serve clients and communities alike. The profession of social work, asserts Hoff (1997), has a role to play in the restoration of a viable physical environment and the development of norms and practices to support sustainable communities. The PIE perspective and the profession’s grounded values provide a solid framework from which to continue to build. Additionally, service-learning courses offer prime opportunities for social work programs to give more attention to this topic and for students to advance their knowledge of sustainable concepts, implement projects, think critically, and problem solve about existing concerns and future opportunities for making continuous contributions.

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