

Connecting SLCE with Sustainability in Higher Education: Cultivating Citizens with an Ecocentric Vision of Justice

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We write from one core conviction: We cannot have thriving, justice-oriented human communities and robust intellectual mindscapes when the ecological systems upon which all life depends, now and in the future, are ignored and destroyed. Thus, an important future direction for service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) is to collaborate with the sustainability in higher education (SHE) movement.

SHE is a diverse, transdisciplinary area of inquiry and practice that seeks to help lead efforts to create a “thriving, equitable and ecologically healthy world” (AASHE, 2015). When SLCE seriously attends to ecological sustainability – when it becomes ecocentric – the movement can cultivate ecologically-literate, place-engaged, planetary citizens who value and nurture justice for both human and other-than-human inhabitants. When SLCE and SHE collaborate, we can more readily see ourselves as contributing members of a comprehensive Earth community and Earth’s “inarticulate but not silent” ecologies (Hall, 200, p. 124) as stakeholders and partners in transforming human communities.

Whether referred to as “landscape” (the symbolic environment created when physical spaces are transformed by the conferral of human values and meaning onto them; Greider & Garkovich, 1994) or as “place” (a particular assemblage of humans and their multiple “others”; Duhn, 2012) – or with some other term – Earth’s ecological systems are all too often taken for granted. Many of us fail to acknowledge our biological, social, cultural, and psychic interdependency with the interactive communities within which we dwell. At the physiological level, the iron in our blood, the water in our tissues, and the calcium in our bones are not only the same elements that constitute mountain ranges and seascapes but also move in perpetual cycles between and among our bodies and the rest of the planet. We are part of a continuum of matter and energy that began billions of years ago. We cannot disconnect from this fact anymore than we can ignore how the ecological-social-political-cultural stories of the land we inhabit and the diversity of entities we encounter inform who we are as humans

and the roles we play within every ecosystem on this planet. Humans cannot flourish when the ecologies out of which we emerged millennia ago are degraded, themselves unable to flourish or even function. If Earth dies, we die.

The many beings we encounter – their very otherness, their intrinsic and instrumental worth, their needs and roles, and their potential lack of a future – ought to inform dialogues concerning the forming and functioning of human communities. Ecosystems deserve more respect as unique partners within SLCE dialogues since these webs of life are not only the medium or stage for social change but also deeply fashion the worldviews, identities, cultures, and behaviors of those working in partnership for social transformation.

Meaningful engagement with Earth’s ecosystems as partners is not an entirely new idea for the SLCE Future Directions Project (SLCE-FDP, of which this thought piece is part) or SLCE more generally. In their 2015 FDP thought piece titled “Engaging Place as Partner,” Siemers and colleagues propose “integrating ecological perspectives and values” as one foundational principle of authentically “place-engaged” SLCE. Their claim is that place is not neutral; each place with and within which SLCE occurs has a “particular local voice, history, culture, politics, and ecology.” All of these facets of place are vital to SLCE, and merely focusing on place as the location of human activity creates SLCE “tourists” rather than learners, “thin and non-systemic learning and change,” rather than holistic systemic learning and engaged citizenry, and neutral placement sites rather than interactive spaces for engaging place and people as partners (Siemers, Harrison, Clayton, & Stanley, 2015, p. 101). There are many examples of SLCE courses and programs that, to varying degrees, embrace ecological perspectives and values as part of efforts to transform human communities. For instance, there is a course entitled “Creek and Community” at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, which invites learners to reimagine how human societies interact and co-create identity with local ecosystems. There are also numerous long-

term garden-oriented SLCE programs, for example the partnerships between Texas Christian University and the Fort Worth community and between Ferrum College and Franklin County in Virginia.

This thought piece builds on and pushes the conversation beyond the work of Siemers and colleagues (2015) by suggesting that the patterns of thinking, pedagogies, values, and worldviews characterizing the SHE movement can add helpful nuance and depth to place-engaged SLCE. In exploring the possibilities of collaboration between the SLCE and SHE movements, we draw heavily on the 2016 literature review of SHE provided by Viegas, Vaz, Borchardt, Pereira, Selig, and Varvakis; rather than including multiple citations in this piece, we encourage readers interested in learning more to read that article. The importance of SLCE-SHE collaboration is glimpsed in the following vignette offered by co-author Tyrone, a Wingate University undergraduate who participated in eco-centric SLCE courses and applied what he learned in his work with Project Morry.

A Student's Perspective: The Promise of SLCE-SHE Collaboration

"I don't care!"

This is what one of my campers from last summer remarked after I attempted to explain the importance of sustainability. I do not blame him, however. Prior to my SLCE course at Wingate, which purposefully engaged human problems through the lens of sustainability, I did not recognize the interactive relationship between the well-being of Earth and human injustices, nor did I appreciate the planetary or ecological dimension of my citizenship. In my world, ecology and justice had never before been connected, so the underprivileged status associated with my campers was seen only in economic and social – not also ecological – terms.

Children such as those at Project Morry, a year-round youth development organization that gives inner-city children a free residential summer camp experience, have big, distinctly human problems. One of the communities Project Morry serves is Bridgeport, Connecticut, which consistently ranks in the top 10 for most dangerous cities in the country, and that many of my campers and I call home. I saw in my campers the characteristics typically associated with children from low-income, urban communities such as Bridgeport: low self-esteem and high levels of hopelessness (Bolland, 2003). These traits result from a common narrative: Many of my campers come from single-parent homes, concrete jungles, and unsafe spaces. So why should they care about the well-being of Earth when they

rarely encounter the subjects inhabiting their local ecosystems nor recognize their worth? To say that I looked into the eyes of my campers and did not see my former self would be a lie; not only did I come from the same streets, schools, and mind-scape they do, but at one point in my life I, too, did not care. But something changed: I experienced eco-privilege.

Eco-privilege is a term that describes individuals who have (a) access to green spaces through physical proximity, (b) the opportunity to choose sustainable practices, technologies, and programs due to knowledge and cultural trends that affirm sustainable choices, and/or (c) the affluence to gain such access to the natural environment, knowledge, practices, and technologies. My experience of eco-privilege came through SLCE projects at Wingate. Ironically, Bridgeport is known as "the Park City" with 1300 acres of parkland, yet I did not really know or appreciate their existence: I never went to them due to safety concerns and never believed them to be spaces vital to my development or identity. However, thanks to my participation in the pilot SLCE EcoLiteracy course (Spring 2016) and my mentor role with the W'Engage EcoJustice course (Fall 2016) as well as my university's financial and pedagogical commitments to "Faith, Knowledge, and Service," I was able to go out into Wingate's ecosystems as well as the landscapes of Asheville and the North Carolina coastline and interact with instructors and community partners engaged in sustainable practices, programs, and technologies that spanned many disciplines – from composting to school garden programs, from activism to solar farms, from NOAA drone research to conservation efforts building oyster shell sea walls. These SLCE experiences helped me realize how ecological and human values are intertwined, and this changed how I approached my work with Project Morry.

This organization offers campers access to ecological landscapes, and in that context I introduced them to how healthy ecosystems can help mitigate the human problems they face. I also shared with them my passion: namely, that we should all love and care for our planetary home. I tried to help them learn about – and care about – themselves, their peers, and the ecosystems of which they are a part. By the end of the summer I saw them beginning to understand how the deteriorating, unsafe, concrete places where they live do not define them or their future – but also that to live full, healthy lives the places where they live must be transformed.

Tyrone's vignette offers insight into how new ideas and perspectives can emerge when commitments to ecological health and social justice are brought together in SLCE. This thought piece pro-

poses that knowledge sharing and collaboration between the SLCE and SHE movements can aid in this integration.

The Emergence of Sustainability in Higher Education

The history of the disconnection of human mindscapes from Earth is well documented (Merchant, 1980), as is the awakening of humanity's ecological consciousness (Hawken, 2007). One important juncture was when American social justice advocates connected ecosystemic degradation and social injustices. Another was when the international community recognized that seeking solutions to environmental problems would be futile if the full range of social challenges facing human communities were not addressed simultaneously. We came to understand that social justice concepts such as socio-cultural-economic equity, intergenerational justice, self-determination, and participatory democracy must be intertwined with and informed by ecological perspectives and values – and vice versa. These reciprocal principles became the foundation of the domain called “sustainability” and became codified in sustainability policies and practices [e.g., Earth Summit Climate Change Convention (1992), Copernicus Charter (1994), United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000), Ubuntu Declaration (2002), Rio + 10 (2002) and + 20 Declarations (2012), and Agenda 2030 (2016)].

Education practitioners at all levels also embraced sustainability. The Talloires Declaration (1990) prompted the formation of several administrative groups both globally (e.g., University Leaders for a Sustainable Future in 1995) and within the United States (e.g., American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment in 2006), all of which were committed to incorporating sustainability and environmental literacy at all aspects of college and university life. There were also pioneers of this approach to education in the classroom. For example, David Orr (1992) stated that students had been taught that “ecology is unimportant for history, politics, economy, society” and that, as a result, we are forming “ecological yahoos” who envision Earth not as a source of identity or well-being but as a commodity and personal possession to be used however they see fit (pp. 85-86). Many still agree with this appraisal (e.g., Al Gore, Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein), raising concerns that people are largely eco-illiterate and unable to meaningfully define what sustainability is even though the concept is present in civil and political discourse at every level.

For educators who have followed Orr, cultivating

ecological knowledge, consciousness, and care is key to reconnecting human mindscapes and ecological landscapes. This approach was formalized as the SHE discipline at the end of the twentieth century. SHE focuses on “sustainability in an inclusive way, encompassing human and ecological health, social justice, secure livelihoods and a better world for all generations” (AASHE, 2015). Associated activities include making sustainable practices the benchmark in higher education; facilitating efforts to integrate sustainability into teaching, research, operations, and public engagement; creating and sharing knowledge and best practices across disciplines; increasing collaboration between the many partners on and off campuses; and shaping education policy so sustainability is a focus at all levels. The range of contributors to SHE is vast, as is seen in the many journal articles dedicated to sustainability and education (see Viegas et al., 2016 for a review).

Potential Areas of SLCE-SHE Collaboration

The patterns of thinking (philosophies) and ways of studying and creating knowledge (epistemologies) that serve as the cornerstones of SHE are compatible with those embraced by SLCE practitioners. SLCE invites robust community partnerships to address the challenges and pursue the opportunities that face contemporary society. SLCE also challenges the separation of academic disciplines and promotes the intertwining of ideas and resources between academics and community members. SHE invites deep reflection on the relationship between humanity and nature in order to challenge economic, mechanical, and disconnected worldviews that only envision the environment as a neutral source of material substances to exploit. SHE encourages patterns of thinking that imagine human societies living in holistic, creative harmony with nature while challenging the fragmentation of knowledge within rigidly separate disciplines typically associated with western philosophies. Thus, SHE demonstrates inter- and transdisciplinarity; SHE embraces a web-like, ecological worldview that affirms interconnectivity – both in the natural world and within the many places where knowledge is created.

Investigating the approaches to teaching and learning employed by practitioners of SLCE and SHE is another area where collaboration could occur. Addressing that which thwarts human flourishing is a goal of SLCE pedagogy as is cultivating “lifelong, interdependent and independent learning” (Bingle, Edwards, & Clayton, 2014, p. 19). A pedagogical point of intersection for both realms is how they involve emotional learning and

the production of new behaviors. Aims of pedagogies in SHE range from skills acquisition, to environmental awareness, to literacy (i.e., the “ability to actively engage with social, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable development” (Murray & Murray, 2007, p. 285)). As SLCE does within the civic realm, SHE practitioners promote a lifelong exploration of personal and cultural identity within specific ecological landscapes. SHE’s approaches to education and learning remind SLCE practitioners that ecological landscapes are not unimportant, neutral, passive sites of human activity, but co-creative life-systems informing and molding the humans who work to promote social justice. Ecosystems both mold and are molded by humanity, and thus ecological and social justice work in tandem.

SLCE desires to prepare educated and engaged citizens, strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility, and promote “social change and/or social justice” on and off campus (Stanton & Erasmus, 2013, p. 63). The reflective inner attitudes and values cultivated by SHE highlight specific dimensions of what constitutes engaged planetary citizenship today (e.g., ecocentric democracy and empowerment, ecological-social-economic justice, and transdisciplinary involvement in governing strategies). SHE recognizes that reflective, inner attributes and values such as compassion, equity, justice, peace, cultural sensitivity, and care for the welfare and rights of future generations of humans and nonhumans alike are culturally, ecologically, and contextually situated. Thus, knowledge and experience of ecological webs of interdependencies is important in the formation of individual and communal identities and ecological values such as empathy. Research from Schultz (2000), for example, suggests that activities that reduce a student’s perceived separation between self and nature can lead to an increase in that student’s environmental concern and empathy for what or who is designated ‘other.’ SHE research also identifies two other important values: intergenerational responsibility and the cultivation of empowered citizenship. Educational programs that situate students within their ecosystems, recognize their diverse ways of viewing the environment, and connect them more intimately with the natural world help develop these attributes. However, students – indeed, most of us – have trouble turning empathy into behavior change. When knowledge streams and emotional learning strategies from SHE and SLCE interact, a synergistic effect could ensue, producing more authentic citizens who act upon their values and attitudes to promote eco-social justice.

Finally, when one looks at SHE as a whole, this

transdisciplinary field of study – as with SLCE – embraces long- and short-term systemic thinking, emphasizes collaboration, and offers a holistic orientation toward engaging with difficult social, cultural, and political contexts. SHE recognizes the complexity inherent in the rapidly changing problems facing learners today and offers the tools and space to develop technical competencies, emotional maturity and risk taking, creativity, and the co-construction of knowledge and values across disciplines. It therefore complements the critical, big picture or systemic thinking that SLCE encourages – namely creative co-construction of knowledge and values across disciplines and communities. When in conversation, both domains could invite each other to deeper reflection on networks of interrelationships and could “result in citizens who are more likely to engage in personal behaviors or contribute to public policy decisions in the best interest of the environmental commons and future generations” (Nolet, 2009, p. 418).

Final Thoughts: A Future Direction for SLCE

The new direction for SLCE we are advocating is ecocentricity: the deliberate cultivation of ecologically-literate planetary citizens rather than dangerously oblivious “ecological yahoos.” SLCE-SHE collaboration is vitally important, and so W’Engage, Wingate University’s SLCE program, has intentionally coupled SLCE-SHE in some courses (e.g., EcoJustice in Fall 2015 and EcoLiteracy in Spring 2016 (<https://utoronto.academia.edu/CatherineWright>)). This collaboration is just beginning, but our early experience shows much promise – as is glimpsed in Tyrone’s vignette. Cultivating undergraduates who can appreciate the intertwining of social and ecological justice and grow into democratic, planetary citizens who ask new and better questions about the way the world works (or does not work), see and name new dimensions of “underprivileged-ness,” and use this learning in innovative ways beyond the classroom walls is what SLCE, SHE, and Wingate desire. Further, students have not been the only beneficiaries of SLCE-SHE collaboration at Wingate. Participating faculty members and community partners are demonstrating more open collaboration, while new partnerships are developing as challenges facing our local communities and ecosystems have surfaced. Deeply rooting SLCE in Earth’s fertile landscapes to cultivate planetary citizens committed to ecocentric visions of social justice is an important future direction for SLCE. We hope you will join us on this new adventure and invite you to share your ecocentric approaches to SLCE.

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