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Internationalization of Environmental Education for Global Citizenship

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Abstract

We present a teaching-and-learning case study of a 2018-2019 university-based summer institute in Beijing, China that concerned environmental education in support of global citizenship, involving Chinese and international faculty from education, social work, and related disciplines. The case study identifies: (1) the context of the summer institute; (2) its goals, design, and basic content; and (3) lessons learned for social work education. Specific attention is paid to: the importance of connecting university-based ecosocial work education with community-based practice in a Chinese context; addressing global social and environmental justice concerns through rural collaborative problem-solving; and navigating disciplinary boundaries involving social work education and other disciplines and professions.

Keywords: social work education; environmental education; environmental justice; sustainable development; sustainability.

Internationalization of Environmental Education for Global Citizenship

Ecosocial work scholars increasingly view environmental education (EE) as essential for educating social workers and community members in social and environmental sustainability (Rambaree, Powers, & Smith, 2019). Incorporated in transformative approaches to EE and ecosocial work education is close attention to *global citizenship* as an essential mechanism for addressing global climate change, neoliberalism, and environmental racism.

For example, Boetto (2017) proposed that global citizenship is a collective ethic that combines cultural diversity and indigenous social work practice approaches (particularly from the Global South) in order to address ecosocial dilemmas. A complementary understanding of global citizenship is provided by Oxley and Morris (2013), who identified the importance of civic participation, social movements, advocacy campaigns, and other community-based, participatory strategies in response to globalization, post-colonialism, and environmental degradation. To Hawkins (2009), attributes connecting global citizenship to local action include theoretical, policy, and practical knowledge, awareness of others' needs (particularly poor peoples and those experiencing human rights violations), and commitment to practice. Implicit in these approaches is an expectation that global citizenship is a developmental process in which young peoples, adults, and groups learn to co-create in the reform of community-based political and social institutions (Schusler, Krings, & Hernandez, 2019).

Although few curricular initiatives have focused explicitly on global citizenship and EE, many social work curricula founded on ecosocial work are well aligned with the framework. A clear example is provided by Boetto and Bell (2015), whose online course involved a combination of synchronous, interactive activities and asynchronous reflective discussions. As the authors posed critical questions (inviting students to interrogate race-, class-, and gender-

based dynamics of power, privilege, industry, and environment), students were encouraged to identify implications for themselves as global citizens in regards to environmental sustainability and justice. Other ecosocial course innovations have involved in-person classes, including student service learning opportunities to connect the personal, professional, and practical spheres of reflective action (Androff, Fike, & Rorke, 2017; Robinson, Izlar, & Oliver, 2020).

These educational initiatives can involve the building of interdisciplinary, interprofessional connections among schools or departments of social work, related disciplines such as geography, sociology, and anthropology, and sister professions (e.g., education, environmental planning, policy, and management) (Schmitz, Matyók, Sloan, & James, 2012). Some of these educational initiatives can reflect "pracademic" (involving a portmanteau of "practitioner" and "academic") learning connecting university-based education and practical education. For example, initiatives can be organized around the development of local community-based practice opportunities, for students to explore and apply the core dimensions of community engagement, education, planning, development, evaluation, and advocacy to their environmental justice efforts (Powers, Schmitz, & Moritz, 2019). Such ecosocial work education can involve a combination of credit-based courses/field instruction and non-credit student voluntarism within the community context.

In response to these related opportunities, we present a brief teaching-and-learning case of a 2018-2019 university-based summer institute located in Beijing, China that concerned EE, and that involved a partnership of Chinese and visiting international faculty as well as undergraduate and graduate student participants and faculty participants from related disciplines and professional schools, including social work. The organization of our teaching case is as follows. First, we describe the context of the summer institute, focusing in particular on the

involvement of the university EE center in supporting interdisciplinary education, practice, and research (including social work). Second, we identify the design and development of the summer institute. This second section identifies the connections of the six courses to an overall focus on community engagement to promote EE and social sustainability. Third, we conclude by reflecting on lessons learned for educators in social work and applied social sciences, with implications for the exploration of future educational initiatives linking ecosocial work and EE within and outside of the specific Chinese context.

Context of the Case

We first provide a brief introduction to university-based public education in China, and focus in particular on the growth of attention to environmental sustainability and education in Chinese higher education (including schools of social work and other professional schools).

Macro Practice and Experiential Education in China Schools and Universities

Substantial scholarship has described the evolution of social work education in Chinese universities in relation to increased need for social welfare services and social development overall (e.g., Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2020). Our interest in Chinese university-based social work and applied social science education focuses on its connection to EE. The immediate context of our case concerns education reform as China began to transition to a post-industrial society, with increased emphasis on the pursuit of U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (Griggs et al., 2013). This transition has created opportunities for Chinese public universities to balance the traditional emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics ("STEM") with perspectives drawn from humanities, social sciences, and related professional schools.

Since the New Curricular Reforms of 2001 promulgated by the Ministry of Education, and reflecting Chinese cultural collective values and ethics from the humanities and social

sciences, Chinese students in primary and secondary schools and universities have been expected to participate in what is known as Comprehensive Practice Activities, by: (a) contributing to civil society by responding to social problems through community service and voluntarism, social service capacity building, and public welfare activities; and (b) engaging in problem solving, involving the use of evidence, research, and other forms of knowledge to address practical problems (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Specifically, student participation in social service-based problem solving includes "…clarifying service targets and needs; formulating service activity plans; carrying out service actions; and reflecting on service experiences and sharing activity experiences" (China Ministry of Education, 2017).

These curricular reforms have presented opportunities for student experiential education, and are displayed prominently in student internships in undergraduate and graduate professional degree programs. These macro practice emphases have informed graduate professional school curricula in Chinese universities, including in social work (in which student interns are expected to engage in community-based practice for social service improvement) and other professional schools (where students are required to connect classroom-based instruction with problem-based learning, often in community settings) (Lam, 2009).

Growing Interest in Environmental Sustainability in Chinese Universities

Arguably, interest in environmental sustainability arose in Chinese universities in the aftermath of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Initial understanding of the concept included the natural and built environmental and its political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions; and incorporated basic attention to sustainable development, as summarized in the findings of the Brundtland Commission (Borowy, 2013; Niu, Jiang, & Li, 2010). The current conceptualization of environmental sustainability, termed ecological civilization or eco-civilization, has been

incorporated into Chinese public policies focused on addressing environmental degradation at local, regional, and national levels (Hansen, Li, & Svarverud, 2018; St'ahel, 2020).

Concurrently, Chinese universities have over recent decades attempted to institutionalize the concepts of eco-civilization (at the national level) and environmental sustainability (at the international level) via EE. This effort has taken on new significance as leading Chinese universities have developed programs and institutes focused on social and environmental sustainability. Specifically, research and educational reform efforts in the Chinese university context are often focused on EE centers, with a charge of coordinating university and civic leadership in support of local eco-civilization and global sustainability (in addressing the correlates and consequences of globalization) (Tian, 2004). Local and global citizenship education is an expected aim of Chinese university EE centers (Niu, Jiang, & Li, 2010).

Although university-sponsored EE centers differ along many dimensions, they cohere around the intersection of the built and natural environment, social and environmental injustice, and education for sustainable development. Such centers are intended to support interdisciplinary learning and collaborative problem solving by university educators and primary and secondary school teachers on sustainability topics (Lee & Efird, 2014). Related questions of educational inequality (often focusing on urban vs. rural differences), gender-based inequality, traditional cultural inheritance, and cultural diversity preservation and development (involving attention to the indigenization of community practices) are also relevant to the work of EE centers (Gough, Russell, & Whitehouse, 2017). In principle, EE centers are thus expected to serve as boundary spanners—between different disciplines and professional schools in universities, between university educators and local practitioners, and between Global Northern and Southern understandings of environmental sustainability and EE.

The University Environmental Educational Center

The specific context of the teaching case involves a 23-year-old EE center ("the center") involving a major Chinese university, an international environmental NGO (i.e., World Wildlife Fund), and British Petroleum (Lee, 2010). The center was initially designed to support EE from a cross-disciplinary perspective, yet focused predominantly on STEM-based disciplinary perspectives. Since 2010 (under the direction of the second author), it has increasingly emphasized complementary perspectives drawn from the humanities, social sciences, and professional schools in support of a goal of promoting interdisciplinary education, research, and practice. A growing focus of the center has been the exploration of collaborative, participatory approaches to EE, reflecting an emphasis on traditional Chinese and indigenous dimensions of eco-civilization, socio-environmental sustainability, and sustainable development. Such efforts have been organized around the sharing of local knowledge and the co-construction of communities of practice (involving diverse educators, practitioners, and community leaders).

Over 2010-2019, the center invited 18 Chinese and international educators to teach a total of 29 summer courses. Campus-based instructional methods have included discussion, role play, case study-based reflection, values clarification, and future scenario analysis, among other methods. Field-based teaching has included experiential learning, observation, community-based field surveys and interviewing, and action research in support of problem-based learning. One purpose of these teaching methods is to create a "learning laboratory" that encourages adult learners—who range from undergraduate students, to tenured professors, to local leaders—to explore EE content using a combination of critical pedagogies.

The 2018-2019 Summer Institute

The current study summarized the efforts of a 2018-2019 university-based EE curricular

initiative that linked Chinese and international faculty in geography, education, social work, and related disciplines (e.g., anthropology) focused on EE. The six courses (four in Summer 2018, and two in Summer 2019) were delivered to Chinese undergraduate and graduate students as well as Chinese higher education faculty; and focused on different countries' approaches to EE, methods of instruction for EE, and civic engagement to advance local sustainability and community social welfare. Over the two summers, the initiative evolved from university-based lectures (Summer 2018) to a hybrid of lectures and applied field instruction in community-based settings (Summer 2019). This change was intended to support opportunities for critical thinking and practice-based learning through community engagement.

Design and Development of the 2018 Summer Institute

The four Summer 2018 courses included: an introductory course linking education for social and environmental sustainability and sustainable development goals; a theory-based course on methods of EE pedagogy and practice; and two courses based on community service learning that were intended to connect school and university education with sustainable community development. The third course involved multicultural and international education for social sustainability. And the fourth course concerned practice- and program-based learning in social welfare and social work aimed at civic engagement through social service improvement. Each course sought to distinguish Global Northern vs. Southern approaches to education and practice in order to prioritize participatory developmental perspectives.

The first course ("Education and Learning for a Sustainable World: Policies, Pedagogies and Practices") explored key themes and concepts concerning education for sustainable development, the role of behavioral change and social learning as contributors to quality education, and methods for enacting transformative social change in local and societal contexts.

The course presented practical sessions where students explored collaborative learning and teaching methods in education for sustainable development.

The second course (“Scenarios and Teaching Methods: Environment, Sustainability, and Applied Social Sciences”) applied critical theoretical perspectives to identify interrelationships between individuals and societal institutions (e.g., school, family, community). Discourse analysis, power relations perspectives, and subjectification analysis were used to uncover social practices in relation to different approaches to sustainability. Students were encouraged to use small group- and case-based scenario analysis to explore the epistemological background of their learning practices in relation to their socio-historical understanding of society. A thesis underlying the course was an effort to identify alternatives to objective, rational models commonly used in Global Northern educational institutions.

The third course ("Multicultural and International Understanding of Education in the Age of Globalization”) focused on multicultural and international perspectives on EE in the context of globalization. Specific emphases concerned: school education in the era of multicultural coexistence; different perspectives on curriculum development in multicultural education and international education; the alignment of schools, universities, and professional associations in supporting participatory knowledge sharing in community schools and nationally; and benefits and challenges involving immigrant learning. A specific case example involved the Japanese system of basic, secondary, and higher education. Students were invited to identify how aspects of globalization and global citizenship that were of interest to them and their local communities might be broadened with a comparative perspective from other cultures and countries.

The fourth course (“Social Learning, Practice Learning, and Program-based Learning in Social Welfare and Social Work”) introduced concepts and skills for planning, developing, and

improving social work practices and social welfare programs in community-based settings. The course also reviewed participatory approaches to needs assessment, co-roles involving the co-development and co-implementation of community and organizational programs, and their co-evaluation and co-improvement at the practitioner, program, and community levels. These course objectives were intended to provide content and examples of methods for local social service improvement, in response to Chinese curricular expectations regarding the Comprehensive Practice Activities. Students were encouraged to practice composing statements of needs, goals, objectives, interventions, action plans, and program improvement approaches from a collaborative service learning and/or civic engagement perspective.

Taking Stock After the 2018 Summer Courses

In response to the feedback of students and faculty who participated in the 2018 summer institute, the following interrelated reflections were noted. First, many students had difficulty with the more practically oriented aspects of the courses. This challenge was exemplified by the fourth course, which was an effort to connect students' social welfare program development and social work practice to the Comprehensive Practice Activity framework. Although many students were familiar with social welfare and service learning, by and large the depth and breadth of practice and programmatic topics to be covered was unexpected for a 40-hour course. This was particularly evident to students who had not experienced social welfare systems and community development programming. Thus, students noted that more preparatory and/or more practical learning content would be welcome.

Second, some students anticipated challenges in connecting current global environmental sustainability issues to their immediate local and university context. Other students were able to draw global-local connections, for example by identifying various types of recycling as an issue

with university, neighborhood, national, and global impacts. However, students generally expressed difficulty in transitioning from basic to more multilevel approaches to problem identification, problem solving, and the posing of potential alternative responses.

Third, student and faculty participants expected difficulties in connecting EE to their own civic leadership and future professional plans. Students identified challenges in envisioning how they could apply the course content to their specific context; and faculty identified difficulties in sharing the core concepts and teaching methods with their future students. This reflection was framed as a request for future courses to be rooted in a specific geographic setting, so that students could better identify participatory practice opportunities and challenges.

Hybrid Structure of the 2019 Summer Institute

In response to these reflections, the 2019 summer institute featured two courses, with each involving hybrid delivery of university-based classroom instruction followed by field-based practice exploration. Specifically, the course on "Social Learning, Practice Learning, and Program-based Learning in Social Welfare and Social Work" was revised substantially. Students were provided all classroom instructional materials (course lectures, notes, and readings) in advance of the course. In addition, participating students were able to establish project-based small groups before the course started. Because many of the students were enrolled in a neighboring university's MSW program, they were familiar with one another and were more prepared for the course requirements.

The course content was pared down, thereby giving students more time for dialogue. Relevant examples were provided reflecting urban and rural contexts for social welfare programming and social work practice vis-à-vis social and environmental sustainability. In addition, course content was connected more actively to class-based discussions, in which small

groups were invited to align their own understanding of the course material in relation to the Comprehensive Practice Activities for primary and secondary school students, and to global and local sustainability concerns. A final change to the course structure involved a multi-day field visit to a rural farming village outside of the metropolitan region. The experience was sponsored by the local community development corporation, and was intended to provide students with opportunities to explore rural community practice in the social milieu. For example, students met with village elders individually and collectively to learn how the community had changed in recent decades in regards to village life, education, social welfare issues, and the environment.

The second course, "Modern Agriculture, Eco-Agriculture, and the Practice of Sustainability", was designed as an introduction to the complexity and vulnerability of modern food systems, and its close relationship to climate and environment. The course acquainted students with subjects including: crop improvement through plant breeding; chemical vs. biological means of plant health management and soil fertility; agricultural technologies in cultivation and irrigation; conventional and online food marketing and distribution systems; vulnerabilities due to global climate change; effects of industrial pollution on food quality; and environmental deterioration due to food production. In addition, students examined the pros and cons of conventional and organic farm practices from the perspectives of environmental impacts, food safety, food security, social sustainability, and consumer acceptance.

As with the other course, this course dedicated attention to issues involving poverty relief—in this instance, by connecting local and indigenous responses to climate change, industrial agricultural practices, soil and water pollution, food insecurity, and resulting impacts on agricultural communities in diverse regions of China. Finally, in addition to the rural field trip to explore traditional farming practices, the students visited a self-sustaining agricultural co-

operative on the periphery of the metropolitan region to explore alternative and practical methods of green economic development.

Lessons Learned and Conclusions

In sum, we identify five lessons learned from the experience of designing and developing the summer institute.

1. The importance of navigating boundaries involving diverse disciplines and professions focused on environmental education. Some evidence of academic boundaries can be seen in the course contributions of the Chinese and international faculty members, which reflected education, geography, social work, anthropology, community development, and agricultural sciences. The course instructors used different theories and methods to approach questions of basic importance, including social and environmental sustainability, civic participation and leadership, and community and policy interventions to address social and environmental dilemmas. A possible result for students and faculty is the opportunity to explore different theoretical and practice frameworks regarding EE.

2. The relevance of boundary spanning involving social work education and environmental education. We witnessed first-hand the value of social work education for the interdisciplinary and interprofessional literature on EE, as well as the reciprocal value of EE for social work educators and students. Across the summer institute courses, topics concerning poverty, social welfare, and the place of social workers in supporting community development and community-based programs were intimately connected to: core concepts of sustainable development goals and education for sustainable development; issues involving power and authority, diverse populations, and social stratification; cross-cultural education and the educational experiences of immigrants in relation to globalization; and food insecurity and

community-based alternatives to industrial agriculture.

3. The significant role of environmental education centers in supporting boundary spanning. We reaffirm the importance of EE centers as boundary-spanning knowledge hubs for interdisciplinary and interprofessional education, research, and service on social and environmental sustainability. At the university level, EE centers can support the exploration of co-curricular and co-teaching opportunities involving environmental education and ecosocial work education. And at the faculty level, EE centers can support course design by helping faculty organize educational resources so that course content is accessible and relevant to diverse audiences, ranging from academics to local leaders. An overall aim is the development of communities of educators, students, and practitioners within the university and beyond it.

4. The value of collaborative learning to explore and enhance social service programs. We noted the need for students to understand social services, social work, community development, and program design in greater depth. We were also made aware of the challenges that some students experienced in learning how to: identify a program topic and design a program in response to community-based needs; ensure that the designed program aligns with diverse community, organizational, and policy goals; and implement, evaluate, and improve the program. We shared two responses with students. First, if programs are prototypes, then one has an obligation to ethically study and refine them. Our second response was to highlight the importance of critical thinking and experiential, problem-based learning for collaborative program development.

5. The continuing relevance of pracademic learning to support student civic engagement for sustainability and stewardship. Students' experiences during and after the Summer 2019 field visit to the rural farming village demonstrated the value of learning-by-doing in regards to civic

engagement and EE. Overall, the summer institute experience suggests that community-based practice knowledge is essential for learning for sustainability. The integration of first-hand, practical knowledge and academic knowledge helps to broaden students' horizons, and increase their engagement with diverse communities and environments. For EE and ecosocial work educators and students, first-hand experience is most precious for supporting lifelong learning in connecting local responses to global issues.

In conclusion, we draw connections involving (a) the internationalization of environmental justice education for global citizenship and (b) its local explication. In the current case, exploration of conceptual linkages involving EE and ecosocial work manifested in the practical interests of local Chinese students and faculty participants. The specific manner in which students and faculty envisioned opportunities for rural engagement and collaborative service improvement was similarly local. Such future explorations will reflect the sustained efforts of existing partners, as were clearly witnessed in the supports provided by the rural community development corporation and the agricultural co-operative.

Thus, we would underscore the importance of creating a variety of field-based educational opportunities that reflect longstanding and budding pracademic partnerships. For educators in social work and applied social sciences, an overarching introduction to the principles, theories, and strategies informing ecosocial work and EE can begin with classroom-based lectures, exercises, and assignments. Subsequent exploration of practice opportunities can then be organized through collaborative field work, in which opportunities for student service learning are carefully structured in response to different community program and practice needs. The overall intention is to help students align diverse approaches to sustainability and global citizenship with their professional goals and cultural values.

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