

For sustained and innovative effort in engaging and motivating social welfare students to integrate concepts of environmental sustainability and ecological justice into their professional practice.

Overview: Summary of Contribution and Context

In 1997 we began teaching the subject WS3014: Socio-environmentalism and Community Work to social work and community welfare students on both the Cairns and Townsville campuses. The subject in its current iteration (WS3214: Developmental Approaches to Eco-Social Justice) is now also taught in Mackay and as an external subject through distance education. The aim of our work has been to raise the ecological consciousness of social work and community welfare students and to challenge them to recognise and appreciate the importance of ecological issues to professional practice in these fields. The subject adopts a community-based, grass-roots approach to addressing such issues and aims to equip students with the knowledge, values and skills for social welfare practice with an eco-social justice orientation.

It has been noted by many commentators (for example Coates, 2003; Besthorne & McMillen, 2002) that issues pertaining to the environment and ecology have been ignored in mainstream social work and community welfare practice. This is despite the overwhelming evidence that environmental issues have clear social consequences and therefore direct implications for social wellbeing (Hillman, 2002; Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). The development of this subject as a core component of social welfare education at James Cook University has placed us at the forefront of efforts to incorporate an ecological awareness into social welfare education. Until very recently, ours was the only subject of its kind in any social work program in Australia and remains one of only a tiny handful to address this important issue directly. For over a decade now, we have engaged students around issues of ecology and social welfare, and in doing so made outstanding contributions to student learning in an area that is finally being recognised as crucially important for social welfare practice (McKinnon, 2008). Our teaching practice involves creating an environment where learners are able to critically self-reflect and, where necessary, challenge existing belief structures in the light of their exposure to new knowledge, analyses and perspectives.

Statement addressing organisational relevance and response to chosen criteria

Our efforts in contributing to student learning in the area of ecology and social welfare are highly congruent with the priorities of the university as set out in the Statement of Strategic Intent (SSI). The SSI highlights the need to create a brighter future for life in the tropics, worldwide, and identifies the purpose of the university as producing graduates and discoveries that make a difference. As future professionals, our students will work in a range of areas within the field of social welfare practice, including direct service delivery, policy development, management, research, and education. In almost all of these instances their focus will be on addressing issues of inequality and disadvantage as experienced by the most marginalised individuals, groups and communities in society. It is increasingly recognised that environmental problems have direct social consequences (Low & Gleeson, 1999) and that these consequences tend to impact in a disproportionate manner on the most disadvantaged sections of society (UNEP, 2007). Student learning in this area will therefore be of direct and practical relevance when it comes to 'making a difference' for disadvantaged individuals, groups and communities in the tropics and beyond as future social welfare workers incorporate knowledge and skills for environmental sustainability into their professional practice.

Criterion 1: Approaches to the support of learning and teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn

Over the last decade one of the major challenges facing us as environmentalists and social welfare educators is overcoming student resistance to the inclusion of the natural environment and ecological justice as core aspects of social welfare education. Such resistance is not unexpected given the anthropocentric orientation characteristic of traditional social welfare education. We have learned that we therefore need to actively engage, inspire and motivate students, awakening a desire on their part to explore this new field and its meaning for their own professional practice. We have used many different approaches and strategies as part of this process, including the following:

A Focus on Praxis and Passion

We believe students begin to take an interest in new areas of learning when they can see that the values, knowledge and skills being presented have 'real-world' relevance and will therefore provide clear and practical benefits in their future professional lives. To this end we strive to connect our teaching directly with concrete examples of socio-environmental practice that illustrate the translation of theoretical concepts into practical strategies. We also believe that

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passion, enthusiasm and motivation are contagious and that the demonstration of our own engagement as activists and practitioners helps to inspire and motivate students to learn. One manifestation of this is the use of our own experience and practice as case studies in socio-environmentalism. For example, a community-based forum on sustainable building and development was organised by staff in the subject in 2003. This event was documented and has subsequently been included in subject teaching as a case study example, which students can analyse and critique. Similarly our involvement in various community projects and campaigns translates into teaching tools that allow students to consider socio-environmental strategies ranging from community building to protest to policy development and legal action. Such teaching strategies allow students to connect the theoretical concepts of the classroom to real practices as well as providing clear examples of educators who 'walk the talk', modelling the values, skills and knowledge under discussion. That these strategies are effective and valued by students is evidenced in the consistently positive feedback about these aspects of our teaching (all student comments are indicative examples from SFS, SFT and subject evaluations):

- *Thank you for a fantastic subject. Your passion for creating an awareness of environmental issues is infectious*
- *One of the best aspects of this subject was developing a social conscience in relation to social and environmental issues, and sharing this experience with the other students*
- *Managed to create, for me, an immense level of interest that I will continue to strive in learning more about even after the subject is finalised*
- *Strongest aspect was sharing of personal experiences, knowledge from people who have been involved in environmentalism*

Engaging and Effective Resources

In over a decade of contributing to student learning around the integration of ecological perspectives into social welfare practice we have developed and utilised a range of subject resources and mediums. Our teaching in this area has been across three campuses and two modes, presenting challenges that we have addressed in innovative and effective ways. Three examples in particular provide evidence of this ongoing commitment to effective engagement. These include development and use of print materials, resources on DVD and Online resources.

The print materials used for distance education students in this subject have been consistently evaluated and developed over time in response to student feedback and developments in the field. In 2005 a comprehensive review of these materials led to the development of a new distance education template for use in this subject and which has subsequently been adopted as the standard format for DE materials within the Department of Social Work and Community Welfare. This template has also been accessed and used by Teaching and Learning at JCU as an exemplar of well-designed print materials and has been adopted by other disciplines such as criminology in the production of their own DE materials. The 2006 version of the subject materials was submitted to the Commonwealth of Learning 'Excellence in Distance Education' Awards, with endorsements from the Vice Chancellor and Faculty Dean. Students have consistently commented on the comprehensive, well-organised and engaging quality of these materials.

- *As an external student the resources provided were exceptional. I do not feel disadvantaged by being an external student at all*
- *The subject materials were very accessible and comprehensive. Overall an excellent subject*
- *The subject matter was presented in both an interesting and informative way*
- *The materials provided were interesting, inspiring, motivating, challenging, excellent.*

Recognition of the unique challenges faced by external students in this subject area led to the development of a DVD resource for use by students studying off-campus. This resource allows such students to access both 'talking-head' content delivered by teaching staff, but also to see footage of significant environmental sites, to go on virtual 'walks' around communities, to see classroom activities and to hear the voices of their fellow students. The DVD initiative was evaluated in 2006 with overwhelmingly positive feedback from students who felt that it made a significant contribution to their learning. The initiative was also written up and presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Promotion of Education for Rural Australia (Jones, 2007).

- *External study can be a difficult way to study (the isolation) the DVD helped me to connect to the subject*
- *I found the DVD very useful, I think it is a great idea. I felt that the lecturer cares about the subject and us as students*
- *A fantastic learning tool. The DVD helped me to recognise the focus of the subject – absolutely excellent*

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We were very early adopters of the use of online learning technologies and amongst the first subjects at JCU to use the Blackboard LMS when it became available. We continue to make extensive use of LearnJCU both as a repository for materials and as a site promoting interaction amongst both distance and on-campus students. Use of the Discussion Boards has, for example, been incorporated into subject materials as a way of promoting the development of communities of learning. We have also made use of technologies such as vodcasting to further motivate and engage students and to better ensure clarity of assessment requirements.

- *I really liked the use of YouTube for brief summaries of what was required, or to motivate. These were succinct but very helpful*
- *All aspects of the subject were well organised and relevant. The regular comics and emails assisted to maintain interest and motivation. Discussion Board postings were very well supported by students and lecturer*
- *Excellent help available through LearnJCU site for this subject – exceptionally comprehensive*

Innovative experiential approaches

In our pursuit of teaching methods that facilitate and enhance student learning around eco-social justice, we have utilised a range of different classroom approaches. We make extensive use of activities outside the classroom, including community walks, visits to sites of environmental significance, and excursions to socio-environmental projects such as revegetation sites and community gardens. Students consistently report finding such activities highly engaging and often inspiring. Inside the classroom we continue to develop our teaching methods, most recently trialling a scenario-based learning (SBL) approach. The SBL initiative was trialled and the distance education experience evaluated in 2008, with 100% of students indicating that the SBL approach helped them to achieve the intended learning outcomes for the subject. As a result of this experience we have been invited to present on SBL at a JCU Teaching and Learning event in 2009 and to contribute a chapter on the use of SBL in a proposed book examining this approach.

- *The scenario exercise made it easy to see how to link the social with the ecological*
- *While you dread it (i.e. SBL) as a student at first, at the end you can definitely identify the benefits and learning outcomes*
- *Overall I thought that it was really helpful to get together in the workshop to throw around our learning – I can see the potential gaps in my learning had I not had the opportunity for this workshop*

Promotion of Critical Reflection

In our experience, students often move to a deeper level of learning when they are able to connect abstract conceptual information to their own experiences, values and beliefs. To this end we have consistently built critically reflective practices into the design and practice of our teaching around eco-social justice. This has been particularly important in the design of assessment in our subject, where the use of critically reflective portfolios has been a feature for some years. Student feedback reveals these reflective processes to be challenging but ultimately rewarding.

- *Engaging in this subject captured elements I intuitively yearned for and dreaded at the same time: challenge, new perspectives, different processes and a deep unknowing to begin with. And with time and effort they did fall into place, they did start to fit together in a way that I could never have imagined (Folio reflection)*
- *Well, it has been one rollercoaster ride. But I am proud of the progress I have made so far. To be honest half the time was spent battling the old predispositions. But once they began to melt away the learning journey became quite an enjoyable experience*
- *This folio has taken me on an adventure I never really expected. At first I thought, what on earth do trees have to do with social work? However, now I fully understand this action.*

A Focus on Evaluation, Development and Evolution

Our teaching philosophies commit us to an ongoing process of evaluation and subsequent development of all aspects of our teaching practice. We have regularly submitted the subject and our individual practice to evaluation through formal university processes (SFS and SFT) and in-subject evaluation procedures with excellent results. We have also committed to trialling new approaches and to gathering evidence on their success or otherwise. The use of DVDs and the scenario-based learning approach discussed above are both examples where new initiatives have been developed on the basis of student feedback, trialled and evaluated. Given the subject matter that is the focus of our teaching we are also committed to being responsive to changes in the social context which forms the backdrop to our concerns with eco-social justice and its links with social welfare practice.

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- *A new and exciting area of social work. Lots of scope for innovation and originality*
- *Highly interesting, very thought provoking*

Statement on sustained student learning, engagement and recognition

Direct feedback from students via formal James Cook University teaching evaluations reveals consistently excellent scores in both SFS and SFT measures, over a sustained period of time. A decade ago, in 1997 and '98, for example, university evaluations (JCET) demonstrated the high standard of our teaching, with aggregated responses to 5 questions on lecturing quality (on a scale of 1-6 with 6 being the most positive) as follows:

| Subject Evaluated | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| WS3014 (average of two years - '97 and '98) | 5.550 | 5.750 | 5.750 | 5.550 | 5.600 |

In 2004 the SFS evaluation for WS3014 scored an overall average of 4.3 (out of a possible 5). In 2005 this SFS average was 4.1 compared to the university score of 3.4. In 2008, the SFS evaluation for WS3214 scored an average of 4.5 compared to 3.5 for the university. In the very challenging arena of distance education, SFT scores for 2008 show 100% of external students scored the teaching as more than acceptable or outstanding in response to 14 out of 20 questions, with 80% scoring overall teaching as outstanding. These scores are indicative of the excellent JCET, SFT and SFS scores achieved by us in this teaching area across the last 11 years at JCU.

Our sustained contributions to student learning are also reflected in our publications record in areas related either directly to the topic of ecology and social welfare and/or to specific publications about our teaching and learning practice in this area. (see, for example, Jones and Hunter, 1998; Jones, 2002, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Lynn, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Perkins & Lynn 2000). Our expertise in this area has also been recognised by the wider community over time, both through our roles in community-based organisations (for example as President of the organisation 'Friends of Picnic and Nelly Bays', sitting on the management board of the North Queensland Conservation Council, fostering the development of a community garden etc.) and through specific invitations to engage in socio-environmental initiatives (for example being invited to act as an advisor in the Thuringowa Sustainable Village project, invited to act as Public Funds Trustee for the Bolger Bay Conservation Park project, member of the Social Development Advisory Panel – FNQ 2025 Regional Plan, etc.). This community involvement is often translated directly into our teaching practice and therefore plays an important part in contributing to student learning.

Our teaching practice has also been recognised within the university and beyond. Peter Jones received a Faculty and a national Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning in 2007, while both of us have spoken about teaching in WS3014/3214 in a variety of settings including Departmental and School fora, Faculty and University Teaching and Learning Events, and through teaching into programs such as the Graduate Certificate of Education (Tertiary Teaching). Perhaps most pleasing is the feedback we often receive from past students who confirm the impact of our teaching practice on student learning and on their professional careers. Two indicative examples of such feedback are a social work graduate who recently wrote to report that her community development work with refugees and migrants now incorporates an ecological perspective, and a past study abroad student now embarking on an environmentally oriented internship.

- *I am writing to tell to you all this because I never expected in my wildest dreams that I would get involved this much into environmental issues. I actually thought of the subject as a waste of time in the beginning. Now I am learning more and realise how crucial it is for community sustainability. Thank you so much.*
- *I think you should know that your course inspired me and since coming back to America and taking another 3 semesters of classes, your class is still one of my all-time favorites, if not the ultimate favorite. What I learned in your course guides me towards what I want to do with my life. (Help in conservation efforts, make our communities more sustainable, spread awareness and help people see that there is a better way)*