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# The potential of ecofeminism to develop 'deep' sustainability competencies for education for sustainable development

## **Cover Page Footnote**

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues.

# THE POTENTIAL OF ECOFEMINISM TO DEVELOP 'DEEP' SUSTAINABILITY COMPETENCIES FOR EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

The seeds of the contemporary sustainability movement in U.S. higher education go back to environmental activism in the 1960s and 1970s. The first Earth Day in 1970 was a student-led effort (Calder and Clugston). However, not until the Talloires Declaration of 1990 (Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future), did university administrators articulate a commitment to environmental sustainability in higher education; a Campus Earth Summit held in 1994 at Yale University yielded *Blueprint for a Green Campus* (Calder and Clugston). Over the last two decades, environmental activism has continued to make inroads into higher education, institutionalizing sustainability efforts on campuses across the U.S. Efforts range from “greening” facilities to “minimize the ecological footprints of universities” (Tilbury 97), to curricular developments that require “educating about and for sustainability” (98). The latter -- education for sustainable development (ESD) -- calls for restructuring courses and entire curriculum to yield “graduates with the personal and professional knowledge, skills and experience necessary for contributing to sustainability” (Tilbury 98).

As ESD grows, little attention has been given to understanding or defining learning outcomes, or rather, what competencies for

sustainability students should develop and be able to demonstrate through their learning in informal and formal settings (Barth, Godeman, Rieckman, and Stoltenberg; Torres-Antonini and Dunkel). Students have been “raised on recycling” (Dungy 272); however, recycling and volunteerism will not, in and of itself, address the fundamental challenges facing our environment. Educators, then, must identify approaches to ESD that will move students beyond basic competencies for sustainability, to what I refer to as deep sustainability -- the capacity to extract and apply meaning (Warburton). In this paper, I ask (and answer) the question, “What might be gained by bringing a feminist lens, and specifically an ecofeminist perspective, to ESD?” Many educators have brought a feminist lens to bear on their work; these efforts, however, have largely been situated in feminist-identified communities and women’s studies programs. I argue the potential for ecofeminism to reach beyond women’s studies; that the time is ripe to bring a feminist perspective into a broader discussion of ESD.

Many seemingly intractable social problems face citizens today, and part of higher education’s mission is to prepare citizens to participate in debates ranging from health care to education, from hunger to the environment. Some disciplines, such as women’s studies, are rooted in social movements (Kimmich) and thus, feminist educators are well-equipped to engage the socio-political debates and action needed today. However, disciplines outside of women’s studies -- those not strongly influenced by “good feminist theory” -- may fall short in their emphasis on, and development of students’ competence for, “practical political action” (Brookey and Miller 140). Stemming from MacGregor’s critique that environmentalists have “yet to take the central feminist values of gender equity and justice onboard” (“No Sustainability” 121), the aim of this paper is to illuminate the transformative potential of an ecofeminist perspective (Gaard; Warren) in the service of sustainability efforts, or more specifically to yield “deep” sustainability competencies. In what follows, I provide an overview of feminism, and ecofeminism in particular. Next, I offer a description and critique of sustainability in higher education. Finally, I explicate how ecofeminism can serve as a

theoretical strategy for developing sustainability competencies for social change.

## **ECOFEMINISM**

Ecofeminism has “its conceptual beginnings in the French tradition of feminist theory” (Glazebrook 12). The term, coined in the 1970s, is attributed to French writer Francoise d’Eaubonne and her call “for women to bring about ecological revolution” (12). In North America in the 1970s, feminist scholars too were calling for the “unification of feminist and ecological interests in the vision of a society transformed from values of possession, conquest, and accumulation to reciprocity, harmony, and mutual independence” (Glazebrook 13). Ecofeminism was advancing the argument that environmental issues are feminist issues, but what makes an issue feminist?

Feminism is a movement striving for the political, social, and educational equality of women with men. Its basic assumptions are that gender is central to the structure and organization of society; gender inequality exists; and gender inequality should be eliminated (Allan). Feminism, while often treated as a unitary category, is not a monolithic ideology. Numerous branches of feminist thought each offer distinctive views and explanations for women’s oppression (Flax; Lorber; Tong). For instance, liberal feminism asserts that “female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints blocking women’s entrance to and success in the so-called public world” (Tong 2). Liberal feminists “use traditional lobbying techniques to influence legislation and incorporate women fully into the mainstream of contemporary society” to obtain the same opportunities and benefits that are given to men (Berman 15). One might point to the role of Rachel Carson’s controversial *Silent Spring* (1962) in bringing about the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts of the 1960s and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency as evidence of liberal feminist action. For a more recent example of a liberal feminist achievement, and illustrative of the continuation of the movement, one can look to the grassroots political action that ultimately led to the landmark New York fracking ban (Mufson).

Critics argue that liberal feminists -- specifically “white women” -- striving for equality with white men, have become so focused on individual achievement that they became “wholehearted supporters of the very structures we most wanted to contest” (Heywood and Drake 12). In contrast, radical (or structural) feminists are primarily concerned with structured power relations and systems of oppression and privilege based on gender, race, class, and so on (Tisdell). They insist that the sex/gender system is the cause of women’s oppression, and to eliminate sexism (and heterosexism and patriarchy), we must advance women’s ways of knowing and being (Alcoff; Firestone; Jaggar). It is from this branch of feminist thought, Hessing argues, that ecofeminism stemmed. Ecofeminists argue that feminist and environmental concerns are inextricably linked (Carson; Griffin; Merchant; Warren), and that “no solution to ecological crisis [will be realized] within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (Ruether 204). Women, Merchant argues, hold the potential to “bring about an ecological revolution ... [that] would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature” (100). Rooted in the radical feminist tradition, ecofeminism argues that “since the same social and economic structures produced wide-scale environmental damage, then women ... were therefore better placed to argue on nature’s behalf” (Buckingham 147). For instance, exploitation of female reproductive power, yielding excess of births and overpopulation, also has exploited and depleted natural resources (Glazebrook; Leach). Thus, an alliance between feminism and ecology reveals that “there can be no liberation for [women] and no solution to ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (Ruether 204).

Yet, while being a woman has been and continues to be powerful for mobilizing action, a critique of this field of thought argues that women cannot be reduced to a “female essence” that possesses a way of thinking and being enabling (only) women to know and speak for the Earth (Buckingham; Goebel; Rose), and suggests political risks and negative implications in reifying women as caring (MacGregor).

In my brief overview of feminist thought and ecofeminism, readers might note that strands of feminism are not necessarily discrete from each other. Case in point: My examples above of liberal feminism are really evidence of liberal- *and* eco-feminism. Other scholars provide a more thorough overview of the critique and complexity of feminist thinking (Buckingham; Flax; Tong). My aim through this brief overview is to introduce feminism, and in particular, ecofeminist thinking, for my argument that it is an overlooked theoretical tool in the sustainability movement in higher education.

## **SUSTAINABILITY AND ESD**

In the last 25 years, sustainability has become increasingly pertinent to higher education. In 1992, during the Rio Earth Summit, the term “education for sustainable development” (ESD) entered the academic vocabulary (Calder and Clugston), and in the decades that followed, campuses have initiated both “formal (e.g., classroom-based) and informal (e.g., student activities)” ESD (Barth et al. 416). Such efforts range from sustainability degree requirements (Rowe), to out-of-classroom education (such as residence hall programming) through which students “learn from what we do rather than what we teach” (Cohen 90).

For my purposes, sustainability is comprised of three dimensions: environmental, economic, and equity. The first, *environmental*, tends to dominate discussions. It focuses on the reduction of negative human impact on the ecosystem, and yields efforts such as greening campus facilities, recycling campaigns, and energy reduction initiatives. Increasingly, these environmental efforts illuminate *economic* concerns and benefits. For instance, programs to reduce energy usage produce economic gains in addition to being good for the environment. Thus, campuses focus on the effects of individual lifestyle choices and spending patterns; the impacts of institutional, national, and global economies; and the exploitation of resources for economic growth. Finally, the intersection of environmental and economic concerns reveals the relationship between human rights, environmental justice, and corporate

power, yielding a focus on *equity*. Educating about this trilogy of sustainability is described by some as EcoJustice Education, an “emerging framework for analyzing the deep cultural roots of and intersections within social and ecological violence ...[and] the destructive effects of a worldview organized by a logic of domination” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 101).

Fueled by this more equity-minded ESD, educators are asking questions about students’ learning outcomes, or what some describe as sustainability competence (Barth et al). The competency movement continues to gain momentum in higher education (Schejbal); it is shaping everything from entire programs (e.g., College for America) to particular knowledge areas (i.e. multicultural competence). Broadly, competency models emphasize three domains: knowledge, awareness (or attitudes), and skills. However, critics of competency-based models assert that graduates may not have the skills to take “action that upsets the status quo” (Reason and Davis 7), and that in our changing economic and educational times, individuals must develop skills in advocacy, policy-making, negotiating, and organizing; graduates do not have “the capacity to enact resistance” (Theoharis 250). I argue that infusing ecofeminism into ESD can move us beyond individual level change to thinking and acting systemically; it can develop critical consciousness, activist skills, and deeper sustainability knowledge. Resonating with Susan Griffin, achieving such learning outcomes would develop graduates as citizens who would “*have cause to feel deeply*” about sustainability, and more specifically, “this matter of woman and nature” (xvii, italics in original).

## **ECOFEMINIST SUSTAINABILITY COMPETENCIES**

In this section, I elaborate on the three dimensions of competence: knowledge, awareness, and skills, and I argue for an expansion of each dimension, grounded in ecofeminist thought.

### *Expanding Knowledge*

Knowledge about sustainability can risk having a reductionist focus on only the environment. I indicated above the importance of knowledge about (and the relationships between) economics, equity, *and*

environment. Yet, knowledge must be further expanded to include an understanding of anthropocentrism, the “pervasive belief that nature is solely a resource for human use” (Russell and Bell 173). It must also include knowledge about the role of ethnocentrism, “the belief that some ‘races’ or cultures are morally or intellectually superior to others and therefore hold the right to exploit and oppress the ‘lesser’ ethnicities” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 102). And, knowledge about sustainability must critique androcentrism, the belief that men are superior to women. An ecofeminist perspective ensures this expanded knowledge through its purposeful “analysis of the systemic oppression of women and nature essential to social transformation” (Russell and Bell 173). In this way, ecofeminist knowledge reveals “sexist tendencies” and the overlooking of gender and other dimensions of identity that circulate in dominant understandings of sustainability (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 106).

An ecofeminist perspective brings explicit attention to power relationships at work in the environmental, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts in which sustainability work occurs. This “politicized ethic of care,” as Russell and Bell describe it, enables students to identify and address issues that are “personally meaningful” but also to examine “the structures that contribute to the problem and our own role in perpetuating these structures” (175). Such expanded knowledge thus calls upon students to ask whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in ESD? Who makes the sustainability decisions and by what criteria? And who benefits from such decisions and who loses?

Notably, the infusion of “care” is not intended to “privilege caring and other values associated with the private sphere that has allowed ecofeminism to be relegated to the margins” of the sustainability movement (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 106). Rather, as students acquire knowledge of and begin to *care* about environmental problems, and they internalize a *private* (and individual) sense of responsibility, they must also understand how “a gendering of environmental duty” is socially and politically constructed, and that change will only be fully realized when the source of responsibility is situated in the public

(political) realm (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 117). This expanded knowledge brings blind spots into focus.

### *Expanding Awareness*

It is argued that our knowledge about and relationship with nature is tied to our sense of identity and self-awareness. Thus, sustainability competence involves the development of one’s awareness of his/her own assumptions, biases, and values. ESD cannot involve teaching about the environment, as if it is separate from us. Dominant approaches to teaching sustain distance between the learner and the content; knowledge is “mediated through books, theories, and laboratory equipment” (Russell and Bell 176). Instead, to argue the inverse of the feminist adage, “the personal is political,” students must *feel* the problem; “the evidence of our own experience” (Griffin 7). In order to do this, students must engage in “inquiry of self” (James 164); they must engage in self-examination as a means of achieving greater consciousness of the multiple identities we perform, and our relation to others so that we might act more justly in the world (Greene).

Those who occupy privileged categories (i.e. whites, males) may be resistant to critical self-reflection, and educators must recognize that developing such awareness is a process (Kirk). Yet, by becoming “privilege cognizant” (Bailey, 1998), individuals are more prepared for the feelings of guilt and shame that may be induced by ESD (Chizhik and Chizhik; Choi-Pearson, Castillo, and Maples). Students must “confront their own, often deeply-seated, aims and beliefs about social and ecological relationships” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 105).

Ecofeminism places emphasis on such consciousness raising (CR). An essential feature of feminism, CR groups, which blossomed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, are a mechanism by which individuals gain awareness and through which they can organize, strategize, and act (Keating). CR “moves to *both* awareness *and* action” (Bickford and Reynolds 240, emphasis in original) through its facilitation of self as an agent of change; CR contributes to commitment and the internalization of a sense of responsibility to dismantle causes of inequality

(Rosenberger). This contributes to individuals asking the question “how?” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 105), and thus, ESD must include opportunities to apply one’s knowledge and awareness.

### *Expanding Skills*

Sustainability skills (or rather, skills for sustainable development) risk being conflated with training that has more instrumental connotations (Jickling). Students, by example, might develop skills for recycling or energy reduction, but have little opportunity or capacity to influence collective action or change on their campuses. Ecofeminism, rooted in activism, invites the theoretical and practical possibilities for expanded skills that emphasize action and prepare students to be change-agents. ESD must develop skills that will prepare individuals to effectively intervene at not only individual levels (e.g., my personal decision to reduce, reuse, or recycle), but also the capacity to confront systemic factors and operate as a change agent at organizational levels. Further, skills must address not only environmental concerns, but also equity and economic sustainability.

The development of students’ knowledge and awareness will (hopefully) fuel commitment, what Eyler and Giles describe as the “urgency to do something” (162), but educators too often do not require students to act on that commitment or practice/develop skills enabling them to act (now or in the future) on that commitment. Thus, educators must adopt pedagogical approaches that enable students to practice and demonstrate skills, and experiential education is one curricular strategy for cultivating such skills (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker). However, approaches vary and yield different outcomes. Feminist scholar-educators argue that “service-learning and community engagement do not place sufficient emphasis on larger social issues and social responsibility and that few students understand their service as a contribution to structural change” (Iverson and James 15; also Bickford and Reynolds; Naples and Bojar). Too often political and activist approaches to civic engagement are viewed as “troublemaking” (Pudup 127) and are eclipsed by the “patronizing role of charity” (Eyler and Giles 47). Feminist activism enables individuals to develop a deeper

understanding of sustainability issues and promotes the development of skills necessary to work toward social change (Iverson and James; Kirk; Russell and Bell). Rather than connecting social justice work to service-learning so it can “seem less politically charged” (Broido 16), educators must find ways to foster students’ political interests and desires to engage in ecojustice advocacy (Kirk; Nilsson and Schmidt).

The capacity to confront systemic factors and operate as a change agent at organizational levels includes skills such as advocacy, policy-making, negotiating, and organizing (Reason, Broido, Davis, and Evans). Reason and Davis, for instance, argue for “action that upsets the status quo” (7), and Theoharis similarly advocates for leaders to develop “the capacity to enact resistance” (250). The skills necessary to carry out ecofeminist work, Kirk found, involves the development of skills, such as “building movements,” “forging alliances,” and facilitating public debate (16).

### *Possibilities and Challenges*

In sum, ESD informed by an ecofeminist perspective has the potential to deepen sustainability competencies by bridging the divide between theory and practice and yielding praxis; by raising consciousness about our embodied and gendered connections with nature; by empowering students to foster resistance; by encouraging students to question and challenge, and in turn amplifying and privileging marginalized voices (Gough); and by disrupting power demarcations, language, and dualistic and hierarchized thinking (Kirk). To illustrate, consider the question of recycling. It is ubiquitous with the sustainability movement on campuses. Yet, individuals should not only be spurred to individual acts of recycling, or even to collective calls for institutional recycling. Rather, recycling viewed through an ecofeminist lens can spur students to critically engage the ubiquity of recycling; to ask questions about consumption and use on campus as part of the systemic problem. The solution of recycling fails to ask questions of the root problem, and thus individuals are lulled into “a sense of citizen responsibility” (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 114) without any pressure on industry or government to solve “unsustainable and unjust

social and economic relationships” (115). Further, an ecofeminist perspective positions gender as a focal point in the analysis. We are called to ask “how women are socialized or disciplined to perform work that benefits others” thus feeling responsible, as MacGregor attests, to “make endless trips to the recycling center because they care” (“No Sustainability” 116).

Yet, ESD informed by an ecofeminist perspective also faces some challenges. For instance, as this theoretical perspective situates gender as the point of analysis, and thus challenges the ungendered innocence of the sustainability movement, it risks essentializing women. Further, it may unwittingly advance a white ecofeminist perspective (Kirk). Educators, thus, must ask: In what ways does the sustainability movement re/produce gender (and race and class) inequalities within the academy (and community)? Adopting theoretical hybridity, meaning to work at the intersections of two or more theoretical perspectives, such as ecofeminist and indigenous perspectives, can minimize colonialist risks.

As an ecofeminist perspective foregrounds intersections between women and environment, it risks reinforcing dualisms (man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion). Additionally, it may reify women’s ways of knowing. MacGregor, for instance, cautions against the conflation of women with caring because it may have the unintended consequence of relegating women to private spheres and undermining efforts to involve women as political actors. Educators, then, must ponder: What are the benefits, and costs, of celebrating caring, compassion, and empathy, both in how such ‘celebrations’ may reify women’s (real and perceived) roles, and may enable men to keep cultural distance from these characteristics?

Finally, since the backlash of the 1980s, the “F” word (feminism) has been a lightning rod. Bashir and her colleagues observed negative stereotypes applied to activists may reduce social change influence. Bashir et al. refer, by example, to feminists and environmentalists who are viewed as “aggressive,” “confrontational,” “militant,” and “eccentric” (625). This, consequently, can reduce people’s willingness to engage in activist work and contribute to resistance to involvement in social

change. I do not believe we should shy from the application of ecofeminism to the work of sustainability; rather, I advocate for open dialogue regarding why students (as well as educators and administrators) might embrace sustainability, but balk (or be offended) at the idea of ecofeminist activism (Stuart, Thomas, and Donaghue).

## **CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

In closing, I offer a few considerations for adopting an ecofeminist perspective for ESD, and the implications for developing “deep” sustainability competence. First, educators must consider the developmental readiness of their students (Gayles and Kelly 204). Students bring a range of learning styles and levels of cognitive and affective complexity to every educational experience. Educators should design their courses in ways that cultivate greater maturity in students’ critical thinking and ensure curricular sequencing such that more advanced sustainability competencies can build upon prerequisite knowledge, awareness, and skills. Failure to assess students’ readiness may lead to student (and instructor) frustration. Further, ongoing assessment of students’ affective capacity is important. As one gains awareness of the deep and intersecting structures that produce and sustain eco injustices, the presence of despair, sorrow, and anger can grow, leading to apathy, resistance, and disempowerment.

Finally, an ecofeminist approach to ESD may yield increased student activism on campus, and this is not without risk. Helms observed that campus administrators and policymakers are not likely to support revolutionary change, and students (and educators) may abandon their efforts if they are viewed as too controversial or face negative stereotypes or repercussions (Bashir et al.). Thus, strategies must be developed to sustain individual and collective action, such as developing alliances and solidarity-building, and cultivating an “armor of allies” (Iverson 79). Stuart, Thomas, Donaghue, and Russell describe the identity and group development process by which activists acquire a “sense of ‘us’... [by being] both ‘ordinary’...but also ‘extraordinary’” (27-28); cultivating a

“positive and uniting” network (28) that reduces “danger to an individual” (29).

In this position article, I have advanced the potential for adopting an ecofeminist perspective on ESD in an effort to yield “deep” sustainability competencies. Such competencies, inclusive of expanded knowledge (e.g., a politicized ethic of care), awareness (e.g., critical consciousness), and skills (e.g., embodied activism), are necessary to address in order to engage the socio-political debates facing citizens today and to promote an agenda for ecojustice and social change. These competencies will not be developed in one course in one semester; as Case notes, engaging in critical self-reflection, dismantling oppressive structures, and taking vigilant action toward social change are lifelong processes. I am hopeful that the ideas advanced here might fuel future scholarship and lively debate for how an ecofeminist approach can deepen and enrich education for sustainable development.

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