

# EXPERIENCES IN SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION: AN AMERICAN FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR'S JOURNEY FROM NORWAY TO SCOTLAND

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## ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Scholar in Norway in 2011-2012, I was able to establish a professional disposition well situated to contribute to a more sustainable future. I have identified three keyways the Fulbright experience prepared me for education for sustainability in Scotland: (1) an orientation towards diplomacy for impact acceleration, (2) exemplifying global dispositions, and (3) validation of the affirmative ethos of post-critical pedagogy.

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As a Fulbright Roving Scholar in Norway, my program involved traveling throughout the country giving presentations and seminars for teachers and pupils in secondary schools and to students in teacher education programs. I facilitated inquiries about interests and preconceived ideas about the US, current events, and issues in American society. I also provided an occasion for individuals to practice English. With teachers, I facilitated sessions on effective pedagogy and interdisciplinary literacy and shared a sense of the American teaching experience. These engagements provided a forum for constructive dialogue about cultural perceptions and stereotypes. Norway is the only country in the world with the Roving Scholar program, and the ‘roving’ descriptor of my experience proved true as I accomplished visits with 6,675 students, 320 teachers, and 75 pre-service teachers in 44 cities, 55 schools, and three universities. Without an international understanding of the diverse political landscapes I gained as a Fulbright Scholar, I would not have been as well suited for my current post at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, which boldly made reparations for financial gain from slavery and is ranked 20th in the QS World Sustainability Rankings.

Sustainable development has been defined as: “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>1</sup> Established in 2015, the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an international commitment to tackle some of the more pressing challenges facing the world today. The 17 interconnected goals are viewed as a chance to build a safer, more prosperous planet and improve life for

future generations. In Scotland's schools, Learning for Sustainability (LfS) is an essential component of quality education, put forward as 'an approach to life', an 'entitlement', and a part of everyday learning. LfS is intended to enable stakeholders to build a socially just and equitable society. Encompassing the three pillars of sustainability of the environment, the society, and the economy, LfS must be implemented in a way that "weaves together global citizenship, sustainable development education, and outdoor learning to create coherent, rewarding, and transformative learning experiences." This commitment maintains a focus on critical engagement of active citizens with issues they and their families experience.<sup>2</sup> The prominence of LfS responds to the realization that globally we are operating outside, "a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below and an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond." Young people and those who teach them play a vital role in protecting the planet and creating sustainable futures.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #4, Quality Education, within the social pillar of sustainability remains my keen area of interest and vocational aim as a teacher educator, to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".<sup>3</sup> My teaching and research in the social sciences focuses on civic engagement, peace education, and equity. Upon reflection, I have identified three keyways the Fulbright experience prepared me for sustainability education in Scotland: an orientation towards diplomacy for impact acceleration, exemplifying global dispositions, and validation of the affirmative ethos of post-critical pedagogy needed for sustainability education.

### **A DIPLOMATIC ORIENTATION FOR IMPACT ACCELERATION**

There are two valuable conceptualizations to unpack – diplomacy and impact. Diplomacy involves the art and practice of building and maintaining relationships and conducting conversations with people using sensitivity and mutual respect.<sup>4</sup> Impact can be defined as a demonstrable contribution, an effect on, a change or benefit. Fulbright scholars operate in the space of consistently accomplishing both as they foster ties amongst institutions and forge relationships through teaching and scholarship which aids intercultural understanding. The US – Norway Fulbright Foundation views the Roving Scholar program as an essential bridge between its academic and public diplomacy roles. I was able to engage in knowledge exchange in Norway on educational issues that affected teachers and students of both nations. Upon my return to the US, I was able to bring my cross-cultural learning into decision making and school improvement efforts.

In many ways, I now serve as a dual representative of my home nation and country of residence. This includes establishing partnership between organizations working towards SDG #4, such as member councils of the Global Network of Deans of Education, thus increasing the flow of people and expertise between academia and amongst partners, one of Fulbright's

aims. I have been able to share Scotland's approach to education for sustainability with American teacher educators and respond to the Scottish national government's education reform agenda. I also foster connections in the UK's four nations through my role as Scotland's convenor for the British Educational Research Association's special interest group on teacher education. I also maintain connection with the US Consulate General in Edinburgh, working with educational programming to further the reach of knowledge exchange opportunities through external engagement events.

Research I conducted in Norway regarding teaching evaluation practices has had an impact on research and practices in the US regarding mechanisms for measuring teaching effectiveness, as well as my current research agenda regarding school improvement through practitioner enquiry and how judgements of teaching effectiveness are made. Additionally, my current work involves developing partnerships between academic organisations in the US and UK based on the principle that knowledge exchange occurs and impact amplified through the movement of skilled individuals into and out of universities. The opportunities for impact acceleration abound, and my experiences of diplomacy in Norway prepared me to effect change in this international sphere.

## A GLOBAL DISPOSITION

A Fulbright experience develops competence in the global arena. It is a prime way to equip oneself with the capacity and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance, without which none of the 17 SDGs really have potential to be realized. Building a global competence is an affective learning intention within the teacher education courses I instruct, that when embodied, become the learning objectives of the pupils my students will someday teach. Boix Mansilla (2016) expressed that global dispositions are about "the kind of person" a learner will become: (a) inquiring about the world, (b) understanding multiple perspectives, (c) an inclination towards respective dialogue, and (d) taking responsible action (4). As an educator of future teachers, I am dually charged to teach evidence-based practices for LfS and a global disposition while simultaneously modeling them. Students need to hear and see the congruity between my beliefs and my actions.

The first and second dimensions I will consider together: *investigating the world* and *appreciating perspectives*. Those who engage in intercultural exchange often share the characteristics of curiosity and a hunger to learn beyond the immediate environment. I encourage future teachers in my university courses to become T-shaped individuals, educators who have a depth of skills and expertise in their field as well as a desire and ability to investigate

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areas outside their specialism. The complexities of sustainability undoubtedly require both. As I work with high school social studies teachers, this often involves interdisciplinarity of literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing explored through the primary topics of social justice and international affairs.

I also advance concepts of LfS by modeling expectations for future teachers, thus I aim to demonstrate how I embrace curiosity about the world. One of the most impactful ways I have shown an enquiring stance in personal development is through an organically organized non-fiction book club. This small group of six formed through a desire to seek a diversity of perspectives and ideas outside our own organizations and industries. The group includes me as an educator/academic, an actuary, a solicitor, an ecologist, a partner of a business firm, and a learning and development consultant. For those who might be curious, feel free to email me for our reading list. We have embraced how what we read directly influences our lived experiences and understanding of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. For example, Gloria Liu's (2022) *Adam Smith's America: How a Scottish Philosopher Became an Icon of American Capitalism* led us to attend a lecture from the Chief Economist of the International Monetary Fund as part of the Adam Smith celebrations which marked the 300th anniversary of this University of Glasgow alumni. We have been challenged to consider what we read and have diversified our bookshelves, moving beyond the familiar to engage wider perceptions. Interestingly, it was a catalogue of the contents of Smith's library described as a "glimpse into the workroom of the great economist" that brought further consideration of what our libraries say about us and what we value.

A disposition towards *understanding perspectives* is what we strive for in university and school classrooms, places in which multiple perspectives and social cohesion are nurtured. Plurality and difference are inseparable from the human condition. Thus, we ask young people to consider cultural contexts, resist stereotypes, and position themselves to value shared human dignity, especially when interacting with those whose path has differed greatly from their own. To do so, we identify influences on our perspective including intercultural interactions (or the lack thereof), and we consider shared values to build on universal understandings, such as security, benevolence, stimulation, and self-direction. We reflect on the ways a natural empathy towards others (i.e., the moral sentiment of sympathy per Adam Smith) might frame shared influences or mark cultural distinction as we respond to the pressing needs of climate justice. And we examine opportunities that might challenge us to attempt to pluralise thinking instead of reducing alternatives. To this end, we consider a reversal of thinking about education; from giving students answers about sustainability to asking students, and ourselves, difficult questions about what it means to be human and how to lead a human life. Such questions I contend, are increasingly essential for us living in the Anthropocene.

The third disposition towards global competency involves the ability to *communicate ideas effectively across differences* and with diverse audiences. We listen generously and share courageously, openly, and appropriately given the audience and context. We consider our expressive and receptive communication through verbal, nonverbal, visual, and written modalities, and we contemplate ways we use language that invites multiple ways of thinking and respectful dialogue. We grapple with controversial and emotive issues in LfS, such as a just transition to sustainable energy and economic practices that don't ignore the importance of human flourishing. As an educator, I am keenly aware that curricular choices – what is included and what is excluded, communicate much about what we value.

The fourth disposition involves *taking action*; accordingly, educators identify and create opportunities to assess options, improve conditions, and plan activities. I utilize the 'head, heart, and hands' model of transformative learning in educating for sustainable futures. First, LfS requires knowledge of sustainability itself (the head). Second, the heart recognises recognizes the role of relationships, feeling, values, empathy, and compassion necessary to fulfill LfS; connections made cognitively and emotionally can be translated to will and ability to act, and educators must be adept at creating opportunities for learners to do so. As Singleton (2015) stated, "people care about and tend to who or what they love" (2). Third, the hands, involves involve citizens taking action. In my own teaching, I embed civic engagement tasks rich in transferable skills; these often involve service learning and synthesising synthesizing course learning outcomes with SDGs. Educators are positioned to identify and create opportunities for personal and collective action to improve conditions around environmental, economic, and social components of sustainable development.

My current research regarding peace education sits at the confluence of SDG #4, Quality Education and SDG #16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. In 2011 had the honour of attending the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo; that year the award was given for advancing women's rights and safety. This experience had a profound personal impact as well as influenced the trajectory of my professional career. I now use the rationale of each year's winning laureate for the promotion of peace as an interdisciplinary theme in teacher education courses, and I introduce new teachers to the classroom resources of the Nobel Peace Center. According to the Global Peace Index, Norway is one of the more peaceful countries, and although the UK is relatively peaceful, Glasgow, Scotland is identified as the least peaceful place in the UK.<sup>5</sup> My research has consequently focused on peace education in the Scottish national curriculum and utilizing democratic research methods with youth as co-creators of knowledge.

## AFFIRMATIVE ETHOS OF A POST-CRITICAL FOUNDATION

I have found through working with educators in multiple countries that creating peaceful, sustainable futures requires a foundation on the affirmative ethos of a post-critical pedagogy, an assertion of positivity and hope that is often missing in the present dialogue. Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zampjski (2017) put forward in *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*, an optimistic attitude, a post-critical direction, for which LfS can ‘gain purchase’ in the hope for what is still to come. It is a belief in the transformative potential of education, a shift away from exposing what is wrong and trying to use education to solve it.

A post-critical inclination might help us better specify what *is* actually worthwhile to sustain. It brings forward the belief in the possibility of change and a validation that there is good in the world worth preserving. Otherwise, why would it be necessary to concern ourselves to operate within planetary boundaries, ensure a social foundation of well-being, or consider intergenerational equity? If criticality is continuously wielded to find fault in everything, we risk destroying morale as well as potentially missing out on solutions. This really brings the heart back to the center of LfS. I do wonder how LfS might change with a shift from focusing on deprivation, degradation, and disruption to emphasizing optimism through a positive ethos.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is still much work to do. According to the UN progress update on SDG #4, school completion rates have increased little and the goal of expanding the number of qualified teachers is still to be met.<sup>1</sup> The World Bank has shown that low-income countries continue to have high learning poverty rates, and Covid-19 has set back learning for at least one year. We should be encouraged by ‘The Fulbright effect’ which demonstrates the lasting impact recipients make in their academic communities and beyond, and that this impact increases instead of diminishes over the post-award years. My Fulbright experience is certainly an affirmation of this finding. There are Fulbright awardees and alumni around the world poised as global citizens and cultural diplomats to effect change and advance mutual understanding. Indeed, that should inspire hope for a more sustainable future.

## NOTES

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#### BIOGRAPHY

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