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The Natural Environment in Social Work Curriculum: A Narrative Reflection of Teaching-Learning through a Sustainability Course Design and Delivery

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Abstract

This paper aims to narrate the author's journey about a newly designed course called, *Social Work and Sustainability* offered at the beginning of social work education, which she used to develop and improve a learning material to enhance her teaching. It is a narrative reflection centered on class observations (from 2016 to 2019) and integrates a discussion of research related to sustainability in higher education. The author used both worldview and narrative methodological approaches to reflect on the course design and pedagogy process. Then Zapf's (2008) model of the person as environment is expanded to lay out the evolution of the traditional ecosystems' framework with the interconnectedness model framework of sustainability. The study highlights the importance of decolonization approaches and transgressive pedagogy calling for the development and implementation of Sustainable Social Work from a culturally-grounded perspective. The study recommends social workers to advocate for a reconnection with the natural environment through the integration of environmental awareness into theoretical and practical aspects of social work.

1. Introduction

Between 2002 and 2012, North American and European scholars produced literature incorporating environmental awareness in social work's theoretical and

practical aspects (Ungar, 2002; Coates, 2005; Peeters, 2012). Besthorn's 2012 article captured the historicity of sustainability in social work while adding Australia as a recent site of the knowledge production on the subject matter. The environment as a concept was recognized to be an integral part of the nature of social work disciplines, so it is not a quite new perspective in the social work field. However, what becomes new is how the environment is conceptualized from an anthropocentric viewpoint, which defines the environment at the servitude of humans and therefore operationalized as a clash relationship between humans and nature. Resulted from the scholarly research are three theoretical approaches that consist of social ecology, deep ecology, and ecofeminism stemming from different philosophical backgrounds, which I will develop later in this paper. These three approaches have two main points in common: first, they critique consumerism and exploitation of nature as the main problem drivers of the environmental crisis. Second, they argue that this attitude to consumerism and exploitation is due to the maintained disconnected relationship between humans and non-humans (here to understand the natural environment) and therefore, the need for a connection to the natural environment as a way to problem-solve this detachment (Coates, 2005). That is why my journey started as I realized that the connection needed more than just a critique of anthropocentrism phenomena, as fundamentally, the relationship between humans and the natural environment cannot be separated. From a constructivist perspective, it can be constructed or deconstructed at the humans' will. Then I realized that this kind of relationship is deeply normalized in who I am and where I come from. I concretely mean my African-centeredness in opposition to my marginalization in knowledge contribution affairs in academia. I was raised to recognize that I am not alone in the cosmos (Asante, 1998) and I do remember every moment when I stopped, sat, and sang to accompany the insect I stepped on accidentally to die in peace while also asking for forgiveness for not paying enough attention to other beings. Also, I was taught not to pour boiled water directly on the soil as it will hurt or cause the death of existing livings. Setting the tone to my position does situate the readers to understand why I took a journey of seeking an interconnectedness model for sustainability in developing and teaching a course titled Social Work and Sustainability at an undergraduate level at a university situated in Western Canada. Interconnectedness is my location determined by my identity that is based on my history, culture, and biology connected de facto to nature (Mazama, 2003). It means that in my African-centeredness, I cannot think and design a course while considering nature as detached to myself, my students, my course readings, my course assignments, and my course content. Thus, integrating the interconnectedness of all these elements brings a holistic and interconnected approach to education.

Personally, and professionally, my experiences span three countries, three continents (Burkina Faso, Germany, and Canada), and five languages (Mooré, Dioula, French, German, and English). I speak Moore fluently, I grew up hearing

Dioula even if I do not speak it, and I recognize the tone and rhythm of this language. My ways of thinking, doing, and being a social worker include learning and development concerning social work practices and approaches in different contexts. I began my social work journey as a volunteer engaged in youth work in Burkina Faso, which evolved into formal education in Germany, and since 2016, as an accredited professional career in Canada. I position myself as an educator and researcher in social work, focusing my work on social work organization and service delivery to adults about culture and conflicts. I was exposed in the eighties to Thomas Sankara's reformed educational system based on dignified identity and endogenous development (Dembele, n.d.). However, immediately after Thomas Sankara's assassination, the education agenda returned to a Eurocentric one with learning content, ways of thinking, and doing from westernized frames of reference. At the end of my studies and as educators I do well in mastering westernized languages, philosophies, and lenses in addressing phenomena to a point that I become experts of theories, decentered from the true self of who I am and where I do come from. Also, I do face the difficulty of having to grasp theoretical knowledge from a materialistic point of view in topics that we handle on a daily basis in classes and practicums. It is this materialism, closely aligned with the anthropocentric point of view, that poses a challenge to bring the notion of connection to the natural environment into my course and teaching. For me, the content of social work courses must be aligned with the socio-cultural as well as political-economic context; however, it cannot be disconnected from an engagement with one's own ways of sensing, viewing, understanding, and questioning the way we live in relation to who you are; I mean engaging with one's own position socially, historically, and culturally while recognizing the necessity as an African to move from the margin to the center (Asante, 1991). Concretely for me, it is about centering my relationship with the natural environment while engaging with my course material. This enables me to be grounded in my own lens so I can describe, interpret, and synthetize the course design based on my positionality. Consequently, my journey entails the shift to sustainability incorporating the natural environment in the social work curriculum; and Spirituality (cosmos in Afrocentric term) is the connector to the world view and the indigenous knowledge (Dei, 2018; Nehusi, 2013).

As a result, my paper focuses on my journey of designing the course, which became an interconnected model for sustainability (see Figure 1). The narrative reflection encompasses teaching activities on curriculum development, incorporating new course topic in a discipline, and teaching-learning relations which are interrelated when co-designing, and teaching a newly developed course about a high complex topic like sustainability. The course poses the question about where we come from culturally when we start thinking about the natural environment.

Regarding the course design and teaching, I observed that infusing sustainability into social work education required a deep consideration of my inherited
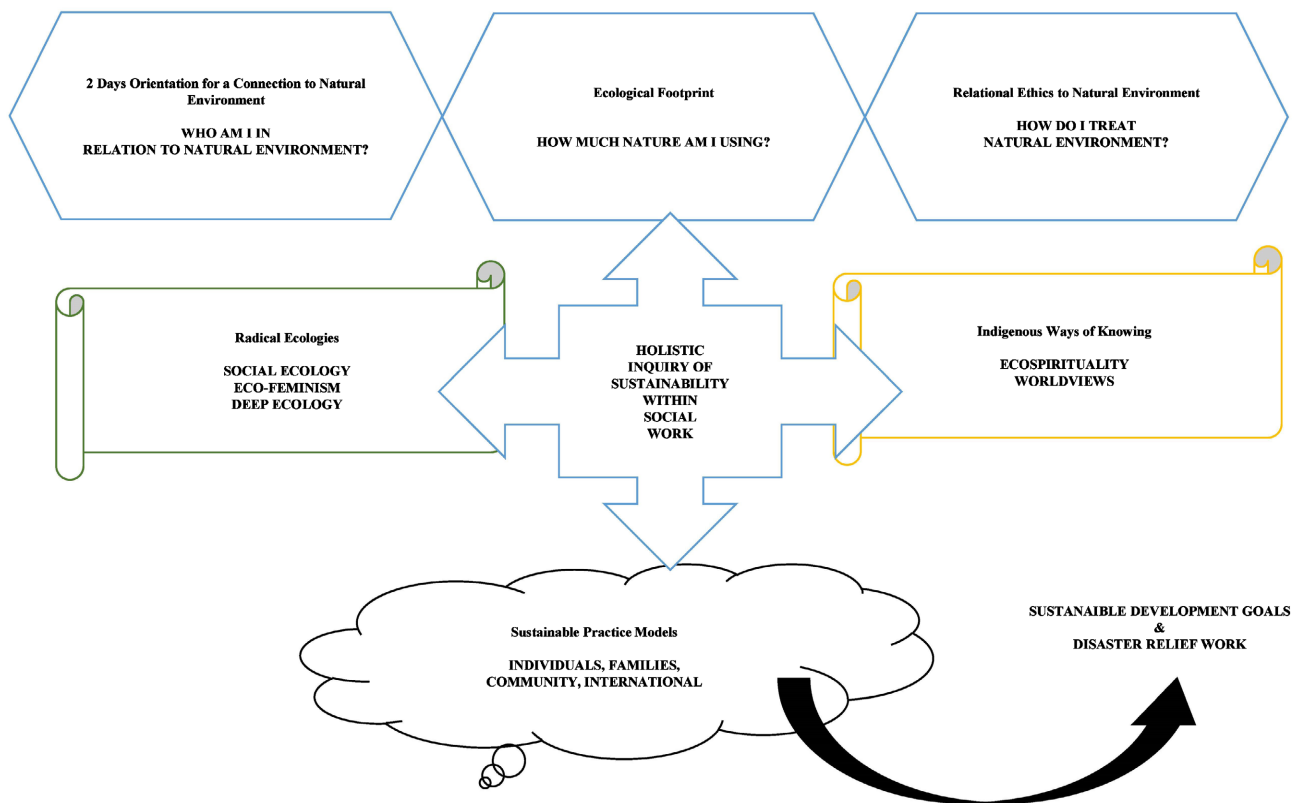
Source: Self-developed by Ouedraogo, S. V (2017-2018).

Figure 1. Course content and design.

Westernized linear thinking ways of pedagogy. In 2016, my course design and delivery did not encourage students to critically think about colonialism and eurocentrism's relationship to environmental harms and sustainability (Scarff Seatter & Ceulemans, 2017). In 2017, I started to study pedagogies favorable to my African Worldviews and Indigenous People's Worldviews to improve the course design and delivery. The following are examples of scholarly works that inspired my coursework improvement: Authors like Hansen and Antsanen (2018) among many Indigenous or non-Eurocentric positions scholars encourage sustainability education to integrate Indigenous approaches as worldviews and knowledge systems that can address the struggle of human activity and environmental issues. Similarly, Burns et al. (2019) propose a sustainability pedagogy that highlights the interconnectedness of content, perspectives, and relational processes in using the *Burns Model of Sustainability Pedagogy*. Its goal is to engage learners to "think systematically, creatively, critically, and recognize interconnections" (Burns et al., 2019: p. 2). According to Burns (2015) cited in Burns et al. (2019) this model promotes transformative learning which means "promising opportunities to create meaningful learning experiences that can develop the personal, intellectual, and socio-cultural skills" (p. 2). Likewise, Dei (2010) calls for a decolonization approach, which refers to the intellectual, cultural, and political resistance to dominant ways of knowing and practices. Such an ap-

proach supports a transgressive pedagogy that understands the inseparability of nature, culture, and society Dei (2010). Thus, it is important for social work education and practice to consider the development and implementation of Sustainable Social Work's knowledge, values, and skills from a culturally-grounded position. The purpose of my reflection is to fulfill this mandate.

2. Literature Review

A brief-scope literature review informed me to observe four main trends in studies done in the area of sustainability and social work: the first focused on clearing the two schools of thought (idealist and structural) that highlight the theoretical knowledge of sustainability in social work (Mulvale, 2017); the second is about professional values and skills related to social work responsibilities, roles, and commitments addressing the ethics and standards practices of the environmental contexts (Gray & Coates, 2012); the third focused on developing social workers' roles to promote environmental justice through a practice called green social work (Dominelli, 2012); and the fourth is concerned with the inter and multidisciplinary development of mindsets aiming to create sustainability attitudes or ways of thinking and a disposition to implement sustainability into social work education and practice through appropriate course content, teaching styles, and pedagogy (Burns et al., 2019; Scarff Seatter & Ceulemans, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2019).

Common to these four trends, my argument is that the heritage of the person-in-environment framework in social work education and practice is favourable for grasping the importance of the "environment" in the broad complexity of sustainability. By this, I mean that if we take into account the person within their environment, social workers can better grasp the complexities of promoting sustainability, recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals and their surroundings in the pursuit of sustainable practices and outcomes. Therefore, the incorporation of environmental sustainability is about inviting the natural world into the person-in-environment framework to lead to person as environment (Zapf, 2009) or to what the author termed as *ecological transformation*.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) person-and-environment concept (focusing on human development in understanding people's social environment as ecological systems) is an integral part of social work's core courses. Therefore, this ecological concept continues to evolve within social work's theoretical and practical pedagogy. Toward the end of the 1980s, Canada expanded from an ecological systems perspective to a more spiritual approach. This shift was to prove the importance of spirituality in shaping individuals and communities, recognizing the impact of beliefs, values, and interconnectedness beyond the ecological aspects alone (Redman & Larson, 2011), a desire to incorporate a more holistic understanding of human experiences that goes beyond the tangible and measurable aspects addressed by the ecological systems perspective. Bronfenbrenner's work invited the social work discipline to think and understand that people are not

separate from their natural environment. Canda (1988) therefore proposed going beyond the systems' perspective to a person-in-environment interaction. Even though this shift from person-and-environment to person-in-environment opens the door for the social work discipline to think about natural aspects beyond environmental systems, it still views the person and the environment as two separate, interacting entities (Zapf, 2008).

Due to its ethical alignment with dignity and social justice, I see that the social work profession has a critical role in addressing environmental justice. One of the themes for the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development is working towards environmental sustainability (IFSW, 2023); the aim is to address global injustices by promoting community and environmental sustainability. The social work field has received criticism for its neglect of the natural environment in academia and practice (Blake, 2010; Dewane, 2011; Rambaree, 2020; Weick, 1981; Zapf, 2010). In 1999, the National Association of Social Workers delegate assembly announced that "environment exploitation violates the principle of social justice and is a direct violation of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics" (Dewane, 2011: para. 2). Twenty years later, scholars still see that the progress in addressing environmental justice has been slow and that there are concerns that social work lacs participation in ecological discussions and action may negatively impact transdisciplinary networks (Sparks, Massey Combs, & Yu, 2019).

Recent initiatives aim to transform the field, reframe academia, and integrate sustainability concepts and assessments in the social work profession. In 2018, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) introduced the IFSW Climate Justice Program (IFSW, 2021). Four years later the People's Summit in 2022 titled Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind is continuing to lead the social work profession to engage with the topic of sustainability in the discipline. The social work profession in Canada is also exhibiting transformative approaches, addressing the role of social work in environmental crisis. In 2020, the Canadian Association of Social Work released a statement emphasizing the severity of the issue, stating that "Climate change is one of the most significant problems facing the world today" (Schibli, 2020: p. 3). Additionally, in March 2021, the Canadian Association of Social Work Education released a new edition of the Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards. Policy 3.4 outlines Environmental Sustainability and Ecological Practice as a core learning objective which is a significant step forward for sustainability education at the local, and national level (CASWE-ACFTS, 2021).

From the 80's to the 20's the engagement of the environmental awareness that Besthorn (2012) reflected on is still maintained in the social work discipline. However, from my analysis, what is missing in the literature (or knowledge production in sustainability for social work) is the expansion of the frame of reference to ways of knowing that are harmonious to re-initiate a human-nature's attachment. In this same vein, several authors infer that the values and beliefs in

Western culture that helped shape the social work profession are not congruent with environmentally sustainable perspectives. The tendency of Western culture to separate humans from the environment has caused human disconnection and structured social work academia in a way that does not value holistic concepts and relational learning methods. Thus, social work theories, practices, intervention strategies, and assessments exclude the natural environment. Several articles advocate for the exploration and implementation of sustainability education that is effective, informative, and structured to initiate effective, long-term responses to the environmental crisis (Rambaree, 2020; Zapf, 2010; Weick, 1981).

In the 2000s, Zapf moved forward with his inquiry about the place of the natural environment in social work and used a critical modernist perspective to highlight the *egalitarian* interaction between person and/in environment. Zapf called on social workers to think and understand the environment with/as a person, so the environment is not simply a modifier when exploring the ecological perspective but an interconnected relationship with a person. Thus, the shift in prepositions moved from person-in-environment to person-with-environment to acknowledge the equalities that unify these entities. This scholar's work went beyond his critical modernist perspective and adopted an Indigenous philosophy (Hansen & Antsanen, 2018) to explain an egalitarian aspect of sameness between humans and non-humans in their relationships. Therefore, social work was called to understand the person-as-environment relationship (when taking Indigenous ways of knowing framework). The human and natural environments are the same; they are more than two sides of the same coin. Rather, they are the essence of the coin itself. It is the essence of sameness that is aligned with my worldview that inspires my course design work, which this paper reveals.

In summary, the literature review allows us to find insightful information that conveys the term sustainability in its multiple angles. It shows that expanding the conceptual understanding of the environment beyond the system theory lens is important in approaching the topic of sustainability, as it allows to center both the cultural and spiritual driven aspects of the environment to the natural environment. Moreover, the literature review highlights the connection to the natural environment within both the conceptualization and understanding of sustainability as it indicates the centeredness of the natural environment in the interconnected model of sustainability.

3. The Natural Environment

The natural environment is grounded in the interconnected model of sustainability, which constitutes the main outcome of the course design I worked on. Dei (2010) from an Anthropological lens defines sustainability as follows:

Sustainability is about relations between humans and the use of resources. Sustainability also refers to the stability of social and natural environments. It seeks to achieve a balance and integrity in the use and renewal of social and natural resources; it encompasses an understanding of the relational dimensions of so-

ciety, culture, and nature (p. 120).

The relational dimensions, from my perspective, also mean relationships in the dimensions of thinking, attitudes, and interactions between people and nature. These relationships operate within their social, cultural, economic, and political references. This explains the importance of Sustainability in the scientific and practical approach to Social Work Education (Mary, 2008). It underlines that the social work discipline links its engagement to Sustainability to strengthen its work with individuals, families, and communities to achieve a holistic, environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political Well-Being (Besthorn, 2015). Therefore, it is the social work discipline's responsibility to implement sustainability into the social work curricula to emphasize developing knowledge, skills, and abilities regarding the natural environment.

According to Gray and Coates (2012), the natural environment refers to "the land, animals, and plants also known as non-human or living things that support diverse life forms [of the earth]" (p. 244). From this reference, sustainability speaks to an understanding of nature or the natural environment as livelihood itself. This definition corroborates my socio-cultural position as African (Diop, 1974) and is grounded in an African Worldview or Afrocentric perspective (Asante, 1991). For King and Swartz (2016) this African Worldview refers to "a cultural framework shaped by ways of being (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), values (axiology), practices of human concepts (principles), and finally spiritual and ethical practice (virtues)" (pp. 2-4). Schiele (1994) defines spirituality as "the invisible substance that connects humans and non-humans" (p. 15) and is considered as the key variable of interconnectedness and interdependency.

Interconnectedness and interdependency mean a relational co-living between humans and the natural environment that is not person-centered, not exploitative, or development-centered (Ferreira, 2010). It is an approach that celebrates the worldviews of a natural environment that is not passive and lifeless for human activity (Coates, Gray, & Hetherington, 2006). Likewise, interconnectedness recognizes that both human and non-human are spiritual and therefore connected with each other (Schiele, 1994). This same spirituality which is a sustainability variable explains the relationship between human and non-human as interdependent (Schiele, 1997). This explains why Zapf's (2008) two frameworks' evolution about the person and environment's relationship resonates with me in both the teaching and improvement of the course design regarding sustainability. In the section about the theoretical framework of this paper, I will elaborate on these two frameworks that are grounded on Indigenous Peoples' knowledge (Mukurazhizha et al., 2023). The interconnectedness model encourages ecological transformation (Figure 2). Ecological transformation, to me, refers to both personal and intellectual motivation to care for the non-human. It underlines the ethical principles of the Indigenous Worldview approaches to the natural environment (Whyte & Cuomo, 2016). Based on the Declaration on the Rights
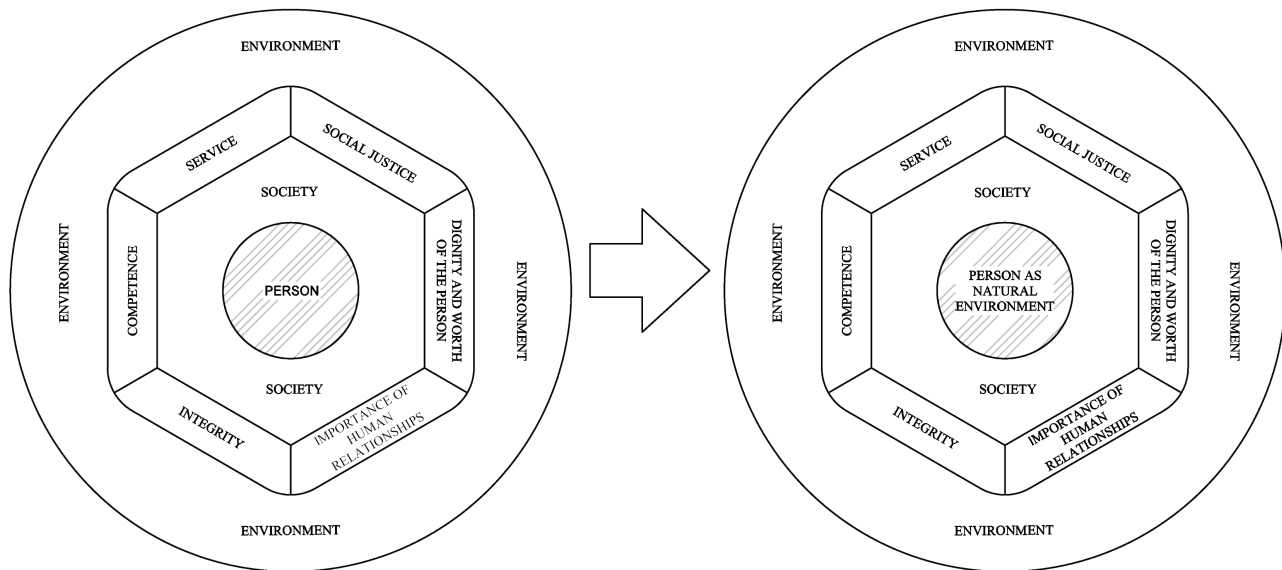
Source: Self-developed by Ouedraogo, S. V (2019)

Figure 2. The interconnected model for sustainability in relation to social work core values.

of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the United Nations (United Nations General Assembly, 2007), First Nations, Inuit, and Métis are Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Because Colonialism and Eurocentrism (Ortiz, 2011) are determinants in understanding this term (Indigenous), scholars and populations not only in Canada but across the world use the term Indigenous to refer to their communities' social, cultural, political, and economical values, histories, traditions, and customs (Henriksen, Hydle, & Kramvig, 2019). In this paper, I will refer to the African Worldview as my socio-cultural position and to the Indigenous and/or Indigenous Worldview to position Indigenous Peoples in Canada. I am also honouring all peoples and communities around the world that identify and resonate with this term in their Worldviews.

This paper is about a newly designed course called, *Social Work and Sustainability* offered at the beginning of social work education that I improved through learning material development to enhance my teaching (Burns et al., 2019; Mulvale, 2017). It is my narrative reflection on the development and implementation of this material in the course topics. It is anchored on class observations (from 2016 to 2019) and integrates discussion of research related to sustainability in higher education. First, I will introduce the course design and explain why the incorporation of variables around experiences and knowledge of sustainability is important for social work education (Figure 1). Second, I will use Zapf's (2008) model of the person as environment to lay out the evolution of the traditional ecosystems' framework with the interconnectedness model framework of sustainability (Table 1). Third, I will present the environmental issues that I am concerned about to exemplify the relations between humans and the natural environment. I will then highlight the importance of these issues in social work and their relationship to ecological transformation (Figure 2). Finally, I will

Table 1. Ecological shift in social work and sustainability.

Ecological Systems Model	Person-**And**-Environment	Focus on understanding the person and his/her/their social environment
Human-centered conceiving Environment as a modifier	Person-**In**-Environment	Focus on understanding the person's self-image and individual identity
Interconnectedness Model	Person-**With**-Environment	Focus on the relations as connections between person (human) and environment (non-human)
Environment centered conceiving an interdependency between human (person) and non-human (natural environment)	Person-**As**-Environment	Focus on sameness or egalitarian interrelationship between person (human) and environment (non-human)

Source: Adapted from Zapf, M. K. (2008) developed by Ouedraogo, S. V (2018).

discuss my observations, reflections, and analysis regarding the course's learning activities (**Figure 3**). I will conclude with recommendations that can inform colleagues about the capacity of the interconnectedness model that social work educators may engage with as they embark on similar learning journeys.

4. Materials and Methods

This study used a narrative method to discuss the reflections of my teaching in the course *Social Work and Sustainability*. A narrative approach according to Ntinda (2019) is a research method that involves an investigative approach centered on storytelling, founded on the belief in the authenticity of narratives to most accurately portray the storyteller's lived experiences. This method is important in research, because it creates a more relatable and human connection with readers (Mertova & Webster, 2019); they can have a personal touch with the research and make it interesting to read. This method provides a platform for me to express my passion for teaching because, in my stories, I convey my dedication to the educational process and the progress I have made before, during, and after teaching the course.

Also, part of the strategic goals for social work education is to promote a quality teaching and learning environment that supports not only the competency and career development of students but also that of faculty members and administrators (Council on Social Work Education, 2023). As a social work educator, using the narrative method in my research enables me to go beyond traditional instructional techniques as I incorporate real-life stories and experiences into the learning process. Understanding the human experience is crucial in social work, a narrative approach becomes a powerful tool for fostering empathy and connection among students (Mallan, 2013). By weaving personal and professional narratives into the educational setting, I create an environment that

Represent your sustainable social work practice model while reflecting and responding to these questions as a final exercise to conclude your Social Work and Sustainability course topics.

Your Name:

Student ID.:

1. What is your definition/understanding of Sustainability?

2. Identify 2 core values that fit with your definition/understanding of Sustainability.

3. Name and briefly explain one theoretical approach that fits with your definition/understanding of Sustainability.

4. Determine one task as part of your role in implementing this approach into Social Work Practice

5. Describe a concrete action as part of your responsibility that will support you to enact your definition, cores values, and theoretical, and task as your practice approach/framework of Sustainability.

Source: Self-developed by Ouedraogo, S. V (2018).

Figure 3. Your sustainable social work practice model.

encourages dialogue, and self-reflection, as well as illustrate complex social issues, ethical dilemmas, and the nuanced dynamics of human relationships. I expect that students, through this method, will cultivate a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted nature of social work practice, and acquire relevant knowledge and skills required for reflective social work practice.

Through this reflective social work practice, as educator I do engage in a critical approach to consider a close look at experiences, actions, emotions, and responses for a better understanding of my own intended teaching interaction with the course content, design, outcomes, assignments, challenges supporting my own inquiry (self-reflection) for further planning and actions on course improvement, learning improvement, and professional development. When engaged in this process, which means that the reflection in and on are intertwined, three categories of knowledge are formed (Mishna & Bogo, 2007: pp. 531-532):

1) Scientific knowledge or knowledge gained through engagement with the course design (development of content and course material),

2) Experiential knowledge or knowledge gained from reflecting on one's own

practices, the teaching situations, or the course delivery (improvement of content, material, delivery), and

3) Personal knowledge or knowledge from the self-awareness of one's own specific issues and needs (personal and professional development on the specific sustainability field).

I used the Grounded Theory Methodology (Bryant, 2019) to dive into the readings and bring a thematic structure into the course design. This methodology is favorable in organizing and structuring the material while allowing a reflective interaction between the three above knowledge categories through the process of writing memos, which in my case were in the form of notes writing in designing the course. Concretely, it has enabled me to link the readings' insight and other course material like videos to the course learning objectives. Then, I have realized that there is more than just organizing and structuring, something was missing; I therefore decided to continue writing the notes or memos when preparing the classes, during the teaching-pause, and after the teaching as I was looking for avenues to build a sense to what was happening in the teaching-learning interaction. I used the worldview and narrative methodological approaches because as stated in my introduction they both presented an advantage to use my African worldview and my lived experiences in relation to the topic matter (Mushunje & Matsika 2023). The worldview approach allows me to use my African driven thoughts, beliefs, and values in understanding and conceptualizing the course design. Whereas, the narrative approach permits me to undertake an analysis using my lived experiences alongside the readings' insights in a way that narrates descriptive accounts of events, such as the story about the warm water in my introduction (McDougal III, 2017).

To undertake both the data collection and analysis methodological procedure, I do postulate that my teaching's inquiry or self-reflection is a form of professional practice requiring a self-reflection process to reflect on my teaching as my professional development. Therefore, I used personal notes in class preparation, readings, and teaching memos (1); unstructured sharing with co-instructor (2); class delivery feedback (3); professional development workshops (4); and presentations at a conference and symposium (5) to support my teaching reflections. The main question that guided this reflection from 2016 to 2019 is "how was my class, and did I do my best today to focus on students' development and learning?" The idea of questioning my one's practice is an intrinsic part of social work practice guided by social work core values. Therefore, social work practice is about being constantly informed by core values and principles to acquire greater confidence and knowledge. This enables the development of the best ethical self (Massing, 2017) that is essential for professional sustainable decision making or responses. Constantly questioning one's teaching content, material, delivery, and relationship with the students' learning development and the topic guided by this core values is an intrinsic part of the practice of social work educators, because it develops the ability to explain, understand, argue, criticize, analyze,

synthesize, and formulate judgements, reflections, and actions (Ixer, 2003: p. 15). Other questions that guided the reflective practice and accompanied the main question above are:

What am I teaching (questioning the topic)?

Is what I am teaching what I am expected to teach (questioning the content)?

Does what I am teaching make sense to students and course expectations (questioning learning development and outcome)?

What did I learn today?

What did students learn today?

What happened today?

What are possible improvements to respond to the needs of learners-educators-school of social work?

What are improvements that will require immediate, short-, and long-term actions?

What research questions are relevant to investigate the course and the sustainability field?

These questions were used as guidance to shape the reflection, which occurred from Fall 2016 to Fall 2019. Limiting this procedure to Fall 2019 does not mean that the author will stop examining her practice; the time limitation was purposefully determined to pause the inquiry process for developing a research proposal and applying for a project grant by Winter 2020 so that the reflection can continue but be framed within a study. It is important to mention that the first three questions were an essential starting point from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017, as it was the start of a newly developed course within a newly born degree path for newly hired faculty. These three questions were comparable to the orientation phase of a newly unique practice situation. This highlights the fundamental reason why the author made use of reflective practice as a methodology to guide the improvement of the course alongside her professional development (Barsky, 2010). From Fall 2018 to Fall 2019, while the first three questions were mostly used as a check-in procedure, the following six questions were used intensively to capture teaching-learning achievements and gaps as well as focus the reflection notes on course improvement and the development of research questions for the enhancement of further scholarly activities and professional development.

The results of the examined reflection were (1) in Fall 2016, the development of the correlation of the six core values with the person-as-environment framework to gain greater confidence and knowledge on the taught content as well as class delivery; (2) in Fall 2017, the elaboration of the course schedule in categories; (3) in Fall 2018, the graphical synthesis of the course content to capture the course design and holistic delivery; (4) in Fall 2019, the revision and finalization of the sustainable practice model activity that was used to conclude the class. It is important to note that the development of this class activity started mid-Fall 2018 and was used to close the last class. These substantial results will be closely elaborated in the subsequent sections of this paper.

5. Results

5.1. The Social Work and Sustainability Course

In 2016, I got a position as new faculty in the Bachelor of Social Work degree of MacEwan University (Canada) and had the honour of teaching the Social Work and Sustainability course. From 2016 to 2019, I familiarized myself with the course topics through teaching and further improvement of the course content and design. The coursework improvement was made based on the students' feedback, my teaching reflections, readings regarding the pedagogies of sustainability, teaching peer reviews, participation in MacEwan University's Sustainability Reimagined workshop, and two paper presentations at two international conferences about sustainability into higher education curricula. The course materials (Figures 1-3 and Table 1) presented in this paper are enhanced learning materials that I developed alone as a result of this teaching and course improvement reflection journey. The goals of the course are to introduce environmental issues, explore causes of environmental harms, identify social work ethics and responsibility of sustainability, reflect on human and non-human relationships, and develop a personal (as a person, as a scholar, as an educator, as a student) model of social work practice that sustains social work service users and the natural environment in which they co-exist. The course is designed to unfold over thirteen weeks of lectures with articles as the main readings, which came from the literature produced by the Global North scholarship on environmental awareness (Besthorn, 2012) announced in my introduction, it is mandatory, sustainability is its primary topic, and it is delivered in a three-hour weekly format. The main philosophy of the course is critical thinking about sustainability (Kahn, 2010; Ungar, 2003) in its three pillars: social, economic, and environmental. My sociocultural position presented in the introduction flows in the demonstration of this philosophy in my teaching of the course topics.

To enhance the course content, I intentionally used the spirituality variable (Briggs, 2015; Schiele, 1994) to incorporate four thematic categories and reduce the course readings from thirty-three to twenty-two. I used the Grounded Theory (Bryant, 2019; McDougal III, 2017) process to proceed to a qualitative methodological guided way with a thematic deduction of these readings. Then, I developed a visual course design (Figure 2) to enhance the involvement of students with the learning information and sequencing of the course topics (Morrison, 2014). It appeals to students' learning preferences and facilitates the organization of the course topics' delivery. Also, it highlights the key place that students have as learners in their connection to the course topics and encourages them to engage with the content of the thematic categories (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011).

The four thematic categories are: relationship to the natural environment (1), theoretical perspectives to sustainability into social work (2), sustainability into social work practice with individuals, families, and communities (3), and my personal sustainable social work practice model (4). These categories facilitate

the introduction of theories of sustainability into the course content and delivery. These theories are Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Social Ecology, Indigenous Ways of Knowing, and Eco-Spirituality (Black & McBean, 2016; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Deep Ecology, as per Besthorn (2012), explains how peoples' deep thoughts, feelings, and values are interrelated with the natural environment. It rejects any division between people and the non-human world. It demands to value the natural environment for itself; not solely for the resources humans can extract or exploit (Coates, 2003). This theoretical lens is important in social work education because its learning can help students understand their deep attachment to the natural environment; then to give a critical thought to human-nature *relationships*, and finally lead them to discuss solutions to environmental harms. Besthorn and Pearson McMillen (2002) define ecofeminism as a gender-based parallel of critical patriarchy, colonization, and militarism oppression of women with the oppression of nature (the same as men-women). This theoretical angle is important to social work education because its learning can help students explore the *interconnectedness* of human nature in calling for a critical awareness of how the natural environment is treated (Wilson, 2006). Explaining this theory helps facilitate the learning discussions around ethics, morals, and environmental harms. And, as presented in the previous sections, to recall the social work education's role and responsibility through the six core values in the subject matter. Social Ecology, as Ungar (2002) explains, is the disconnection of the human as a social being from nature as a natural environmental being. These first three theoretical perspectives are important to social work education because their learning can help students to identify the humans' place in nature. The course topics will also help students analyze the *interdependency* idea of sustainability, reflect on environmental harms caused by their lifestyles and brainstorm solutions that can bring a balance between the co-existence of the natural and social worlds. Hansen and Antsanen (2018) note that "Indigenous Ways of Knowing, and Eco-Spirituality explain indigenous culture, ideas, and traditions. These consist of traditional teachings, reciprocity, relationships with nature, and spirituality" (p. 4). These theoretical perspectives are critical to social work education, because they offer alternative ideas and actions to Eurocentric approaches (Watt-Cloutier, 2016). These alternative approaches are vital to forming social workers' knowledge and skills that support their practices to address environmental issues. Its learning informs students with values and ideas of Indigenous peoples' knowledge; it encourages them to incorporate teachings like "humans are not above nature" (Hansen & Antsanen, 2018: p. 5) in their social work interventions.

Common to all five theoretical approaches (Social Ecology, Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Eco-Spirituality) are the spiritual variable introduced in the course topics and the emphasis on Worldviews that recognize a co-existing human-natural environment relationship. To summarize, the teaching of sustainability in social work education (Figure 1) is about the ecological transformation that is favorable to healthy relationships between

people and the natural environment. Please see **Figure 2** to review how the four thematic categories' course content can be used to 1) explain theories of sustainability and 2) introduce the two frameworks of person and the environment into social work education.

5.2. Two Frameworks to Understand the Person (And, In, With, As) Environment

The original person-and-environment framework (focused on human development in understanding people's social environments as ecological systems) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) continues to be introduced in social work education. This ecological concept continues to evolve within the social work thinking and practice pedagogy. Based on a contextual perspective, this concept, explains the transactional aspect between individuals, families, and communities and their surroundings as systems (e.g. schools, hospitals, social services, and recreational spaces). The introduction of this concept in the context of a sustainability course aims to prepare students to grasp the influences of micro-, meso-, and macro-systems on people's situations and to assess at which system level their struggles are (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner invited social work education to consider people not as separate, but rather part of their natural environment. In the 1980's Canda therefore proposed to go beyond a narrow systems' perspective to think about interactions between persons-in-their-environments (Canda, 1988). This shift of prepositions from person-**and**-environment to person-**in**-environment, opens the door for social workers to think about natural aspects, beyond the systems aspect of the environment, but the profession still views *Person* and *Environment* as two separate entities that interact with one another Zapf (2008).

In the 2000s, Zapf moved forward with the inquiry about the understanding and the place of nature in social work. This scholar started from a critical modernist perspective to highlight the *egalitarian* interaction between a person and/or in environment. Zapf (2008) called on social workers to envision the environment with/as a person so that the environment was no longer only a modifier when taking the ecological perspective, but an interconnected relationship. The shift of prepositions then goes from person-**in**-environment to person-**with**-environment. This change emphasizes the equality that unifies these two entities. Zapf's work went beyond a critical modernist perspective by taking an Indigenous approach, to explain that this egalitarian aspect must consider the spiritual aspect that values people the same as the environment. Therefore, social work is urged to take a more Indigenous Ways of Knowing Framework that aims to understand person-**as**-environment. To sum up, the shift of prepositions (And, In, With, As) represents the shift of the relationships (from duality to sameness) between nature or the natural environment and person, families, and communities (Zapf, 2010).

Similarly, the course embraced this same journey in introducing the "Environment" as a concept and practice model that thrives beyond the traditional

ecological systems' perspective. Please see Table 1 to review how these two frameworks can be used to incorporate ecological transformation and the exploration of environmental issues throughout all social work education.

5.3. Environmental Issues and Ecological Transformation in Social Work Education

Environmental issues in social work education are: pollution, overexploitation of resources, and oppression that disrupt the ecosystems comprised of humans and nature or the natural environment (Dominelli, 2012). It means that environmental harms are at the center of environmental issues. Examples of environmental damages are soil, water, and air pollution. There are also negative climate change outcomes such as: flooding, earthquakes, droughts, and wildfires. These destructions are important to social work education because they render access to food, housing, health, and income relevant to nature and people's well-being insecure or vulnerable (Gamble, 2012). Social policy aspects such as the lack or the non-respect of environmental protection regulations when industries and corporations exploit resources like gold, oil, gas, uranium, and diamond must also be considered because they increase the risks of pollution and unsecured access to basic needs for both humans and non-humans (Dominelli, 2014; Shaw, 2011). To summarize, social, cultural, economic, and political programs and actions that are mostly centered on maximization of benefits for humans to the detriment of the natural environment cause environmental degradation (Mosher, 2010). This is also known as Anthropocene; the "human-induced accelerated change or overexploitation to Earth's climate, land, oceans, biosphere that causes environmental [harms] or degradation" (Mbembe, 2016: p. 14). It increases the disproportionate effects of environmental issues and harms on Indigenous and African/black communities as well as marginalized and oppressed populations' well-being (Waldron, 2018). Teaching these environmental issues as course topics in the social work curriculum is important, because they allow us to analyze the core social work values and principles which are the ethical guide of social work as a human service profession. According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), there are six core values: *Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons*, *Pursuit of social justice*, *Service to humanity*, *Integrity in professional practice*, *Confidentiality in professional practice*, and *Competence in professional practice* (CASW, 2005). Each value is supported by principles to guide ethical decisions of social workers' practice with service users. The articulation of these core values and principles to sustainability allows us to explain the shift from a traditional human-centered to a natural environment centered social work practice (Zapf, 2010). It motivates ecological transformation in social workers' interventions with service users. To encourage students' learning motivation and to gain their attention on the course subject matter, I used Figure 2 at the end and beginning of the weekly lesson plan to explain the importance and broad outcome of the social work and sustainability course. Please see Figure 2 to review how the ecological transformation from the hu-

man-centered framework to the natural environment-centered social work practice can be used to introduce sustainability into social work education. To summarize, the shift in prepositions (and, in, with, as) represents the shift of relationships (from duality to sameness) between nature; the non-human world; the natural environment; and the person, people, and place (Zapf, 2010).

This graph (Figure 2) represents the ecological transformation from human-centered framework; the focus is solely on the person's needs, wants, and greed which aligns with the anthropocentric perspective as discussed in the introduction, to the natural environment-centred social work practice: A Nature Sameness Person Matters' Perspective. As explained in the introduction, the human-nature sameness is for me the best perspective to bring into the course content and applied learning activities that will showcase the shift to the interconnectedness model. At the core of this model is that humans and non-humans share, continue sharing, and will be sharing an inseparable relationship as living beings. Thus, Zapf's (2008) contribution was a favorable perspective for me to stand on and be able to move from the margin to my centeredness, which also allowed me to move the course design from the anthropocentric stand to the interconnected center. The six social work core values (Integrity, Competence, Service, Social Justice, Dignity and Worth of the Person, and Importance of Human relationships) indicated in Figure 2, are important as they represent the ethical dimension of social work practice. The social work core values are part of the social work code of ethics and ethical principles provided by accreditation bodies (for those countries where social work as a profession is aligned to the recognition of the profession through professional accreditation bodies). In my case, I am referring to the values provided by the Canadian Association of Social Worker's (CASW) code of ethics (CASW, 2005). Going back to my African-centeredness, I can reframe these core values to stress the ethical values of Maat (truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order) which aligns with the pursuit of a just and good society (Karenga, 1989).

In summary, the interconnectedness model paves the way to introduce the connection to the natural environment as a relationship that can be initiated and maintained within social sciences and humanities. At the same time, it highlights social work and human service professions' essential role in addressing environmental issues. Using cultural and spiritual driven approaches like lived experiences and worldview to center other ways of knowing are at the core of the examination like the narrative analysis that I used. Other ways of knowing become core, the same as the mainstream knowledge to lead to transformative paths.

6. Discussion

In this section, I will use the pronoun *we* as I do recognize that my observations, reflections, and analysis around the teaching and learning activities were possible thanks to the ideas gained through interactions with students, colleagues,

and readings. The teaching and learning activities that we undertook within the course topics were: readings; group work writings and presentations; lectures; guest speakers' inputs; case studies (Dhiman & Marques, 2016); and videos (Fox, 2007; Page & Daniel, 2019). We also based our teaching and learning on a variety of materials and channels to respond to the students' diverse learning styles. Moreover, students were invited to work individually and in groups. They were also encouraged to bring their prior knowledge and ideas about sustainability and environmental issues to online- and in-class discussions.

The first week of the course started with an online activity inviting students to introduce themselves and speak about their relationships with the natural environment and its role in their lives (Pelo, 2014). Students were invited to read each other's online posts and start a brief discussion with their peers in responding to at least one of their peers' posts.

During the second week, we continued our learning process in an in-class setting. Students engaged with readings and an online activity to calculate their ecological footprint (Alvarez & Rogers, 2006). The question of the online activity was: how much nature do our lifestyles require as individuals, as consumers, and as a society? Calculating one's ecological footprint is a tool used to assess the human world's pressure on the planet. Through this activity, students learned about the amount of nature that our contemporary or Anthropocene lifestyles heavily demand.

In the third week, we moved the class toward an understanding of environmental ethics (Gray & Coates, 2012) mainly through readings and group work activities. The group work activities focused on this question: how do I treat the natural environment? Students were invited to make use of Social Work's six core values (Figure 1) to elaborate their group discussions. They were asked to share their ideas about how to incorporate the values of natural environment into these principles.

The two-day orientation and the first three weeks helped build a learning space to value students' experiences, knowledge, and beliefs about the natural environment in their personal lives' habits. It also strengthened their relation to social work's mandate, role, and responsibility as they engaged with readings, assessment tools, and discussions (online and in-class) which revealed the potential for critical thinking about human and non-human interdependencies (Podger et al., 2010).

Weeks four, five, and six were dedicated to explaining and processing sustainability theories. As the main learning activity, students were invited through an individual assignment to read four articles about Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, and Social Ecology and summarize the main ideas of the three main theoretical frameworks also known as the eco-social approaches (Norton, 2011). Indigenous Ways and Knowing and Eco-Spirituality were handled in two classes through readings, guest lectures (invitation of scholar or social worker or community member identifying themselves as Indigenous People) or videos (Black, 2010; Monbiot, 2014), and group work. During these classes, we shared, discussed, and

learned how Indigenous knowledge can inform social work around environmental issues. It helped to make use of one's own socio-cultural position, as I did in the introduction of this paper, to encourage students' reflections.

The classes of weeks seven to ten were dedicated to bridging theories and practices. Students were encouraged to explore, through group work, activities on sustainable community practices to demonstrate how they will contribute to developing sustainable environmental practices and how they will promote justice and sustainable development in social work practices (Bexell et al., 2019; Smith, 2013). Through these activities, students learned about community initiatives and movements against environmental harm in Edmonton (Canada).

For weeks eleven and twelve, we focused on disaster relief work and International Sustainable Development Goals (Peeters, 2012; Probst, 2013). The topic of Disaster Relief Work was mostly about social work contribution to aftermath professional responses to global disasters situations devastating people's social, economic, and environmental lives through psycho-social support of individuals, families, and communities. It also questioned social work's role in preventative professional responses in terms of enacting research, advocacy in policy development, and implementation around sustainability (Drolet, 2019; Mathbor, 2007). Opening this engagement to link the 'local and global' lead us to examine the United Nations (UN) *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* (Lombard, 2015; UN, 2015) as an international learning platform to unify the global effort for the well-being of the planet. Students received a case study to work in groups of three to four where they were asked to: identify the issue/problem; align this issue/problem to one of the international Sustainable Development Goals; situate the dimension of well-being that fit the goal; determine a task/action as social workers' role to undertake; explain a theoretical approach of sustainability learned applicable to the case; and, develop a sustainable social work intervention to address the issue/problem. I observed from the discussions resulting from the group work, that the knowledge-shared focused on the relationship of person-as-environment based on interconnectedness ideas as defined in the introduction of this paper (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

During the last and thirteenth week, students were invited to fill out a form summarizing their learning and representing their sustainable practice model, which was meant to bridge theory and practice and define the level and dimension of practice that they infused with knowledge of sustainability (Besthorn & Canda, 2002). I also concluded the thirteen weeks of classes with a reflective form that I termed *Your Sustainability Social Work Practice Model* (Figure 3) that reiterated the relationships or holistic articulation of the three phases of the course design and delivery: between the ecological transformation (1); the six social work core values (2); and, (3) the lecturing-readings-group works' weekly course arrangement. Intertwined, these phases built the person-as-environment roadmap to teach the interconnected natural environment model for sustainability into a social work curriculum.

7. Conclusion

The main lessons learned were that a re-connection to the natural environment, the effort to continually teach oneself about the relevance of the natural environment in one's personal life, and the viability of sustainability in social work professional identity must be the intentional cultural-bound pedagogical purpose of the course design process. I entered this teaching-learning relationship more grounded and with more confidence. Using for example a reading about endogenous development with a case study from Burkina Faso that analyzed Thomas Sankara's ecological engagement led me to share more about who I am and where I am coming from; doing so opens doors to African perspectives and experiences with students. It also leads to expanding learning outside of the Eurocentric world and for students to get information about the contribution of Africa to the topic as it is Africa which gets the first sustainability policy; student therefore learns about the existence of the *African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources* (adopted on September 15, 1968 by the African Union, 2016), and also discusses how it is important from a decolonial approach to know that the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals* (*SDGs*) are not the only frame of reference when we approach the topic of sustainability. It means that outside of the westernized box, there are so many philosophies, policies, lived experiences, wisdoms, and knowledge that are equally valuable and useful for all of us to approach phenomena and work on problem-solving. Moreover, the connection to the course topics remained after the students' graduation, as some of them sometimes contacted me to share one of their daily implementations of their knowledge of sustainability. Overall, this teaching and learning reflection can inform social work educators to initiate or maintain the development of sustainability knowledge in the social work discipline. This reflection, for example, led me to develop a research project that will explore the utilization of sustainability knowledge in social work daily practice with service users across diverse fields of practice. The purpose of the research is to foster and nurture the knowledge of sustainability as a continuing professional development and to develop and bring sustainability-infused social work practice-oriented case examples in the pedagogy. Therefore, I conclude by inviting social work educators and practitioners to make use of my teaching-learning reflection materials that I have developed (Table 1 and Figures 1-3) so they may engage reflectively with Anthropocene problems to add to the development of knowledge inquiry about the incorporation of environmental sustainability content into the social work curriculum.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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