Self-Care as a Way of Being: Fostering Inner Work in a Graduate Sustainability Leadership Course

Heather Burns

Graduate School of Education, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

Abstract

Sustainability education is a way of learning and teaching that mimics the kind of world we want to create, focusing on transforming our ways of knowing and being so that we can foster healthy, interconnected, just, and resilient communities. Emerging sustainability leaders in higher education are often challenged by the immensity of this work and by the stress and overcommitment within the culture of academia. This article explores the importance of engaging in both the outer and inner work of sustainability, including a focus on self-care. Based on an action research study of a graduate sustainability leadership course, this article highlights data from a self-care plan assignment. The results provide insight into students’ perceptions of self-care as a way of being, and how educators can best acknowledge and nurture self-care as a way of being in sustainability education and leadership development. Key Words: Sustainability education—Leadership education—Self-care—Higher education.

In response to immense social and ecological challenges such as climate change and vast inequities, sustainability has increasingly become a major focus in higher education. Sustainability refers to the work of changing our ways of being and to acting collaboratively to create regenerative, just, and flourishing communities. A concept that is value-driven and interdisciplinary, at its core sustainability reflects a need for humans to acknowledge our profound dependency on the earth and to ask what our responsibilities are to other human beings and to nonhumans (Glasser, 2016).

Within higher education, sustainability education and sustainability leadership development focus on recognizing the importance of interconnectedness or interbeing, and transforming perceptions and actions to foster healthy, just, and resilient systems (Burns, 2015; Nolet, 2009; Orr, 2011; Sterling, 2002). Sustainability education also shifts learning from a passive, hierarchical process to an active, holistic, and collaborative process—a shift to learning as sustainability (Sterling, 2002). Sustainability education is thus a way of learning and teaching that mimics the kind of world we want to create. This learning requires the outer work of theorizing, experimenting, and problem solving with others as well as the deep inner work of transforming paradigms and perspectives (Schley, 2006).

The culture of higher education, which can be rich in ideas and innovation, also reflects the dominant culture in its constant push for outcomes, acquisition, and status. Workaholism and overcommitment are often-used strategies to gain status and success in this stressful culture that rewards extreme imbalance (Nagpal, 2013). For emerging sustainability leaders in higher education, there is additional urgency to learn how to effectively make sustainable change. Based on an action research study of a graduate sustainability leadership course, this article highlights students’ perceptions of self-care and leadership as a way of being that intentionally supports both personal health and the sustainability movement.

I first include a discussion of sustainability leadership education to provide context for how I understand and teach the sustainability leadership course that was the focus of this study. I also include an argument for a focus on self-care within this context. I then outline the methodology used in this study and provide results that focus on students’ own perceptions of and priorities for self-care and their understanding of sustainability leadership. These results offer insight into the importance of self-care as a way of being in sustainability education and leadership development.
Sustainability Leadership Education

Sustainability education, particularly in higher education, has the potential to foster committed sustainability leaders (Parkin, 2010). In higher education, the connection between leadership and sustainability work is already reflected in the emphasis on leadership development models such as the Social Change Model of Leadership (Astin & Astin, 1996) and the Relational Model of Leadership (Komives et al., 1998), which highlight collaboration, inclusiveness, common purpose, and change rooted in values.

In addition to these important aspects of leadership, sustainability leadership also acknowledges interconnectedness with other living systems. Sustainability leadership is informed by complexity science, which helps us recognize, for example, that organizations are complex living systems with the capacity to self-organize and to change creatively. This is a perception shift from the traditional role of leadership in which the future can be predicted, controlled, planned, and achieved, to the reality of leadership rooted in flexibility, collaboration, and emergent self-organizing relationships (Ferdig, 2007; Wheatley, 2006). As interconnected, interdependent beings, our very existence is relational (Eisenstein, 2013); thus our ways of working together must reflect these relationships. Furthermore, as humans we are fundamentally not separate from other living beings and systems. Sustainability leadership education reflects a shift in worldview from primarily separate and mechanistic systems to interconnected living systems. This understanding is also known as interbeing, a deep relational interdependency on other beings (Eisenstein, 2013).

Sustainability leadership is also a lateral process that invites participation and collaboration (Burns, Vaught, & Bauman, 2015). Within this perspective, anyone can be a sustainability leader (Ferdig, 2007), with willingness to engage with others in the complex and emergent process of working for sustainable change. Sustainability leadership development can be supported in various ways: learning in cohorts, spending time cultivating authentic relationships, working together on small and large group projects, engaging in reflective practices, and participating in community-based learning (CBL) projects (Burns, et al., 2015; Eich, 2008).

Importance of Self-Care to Sustainability Leadership Development

A shift toward sustainability requires leaders who are committed, not just to creating change, but who recognize the importance of taking care of themselves and others and of "deliberately slowing down their lives to cultivate broader awareness and reflective practice" (Schley, 2006, p. 2). This work of developing personal practices is the inner work of sustainability (Schley, 2006). Participating in sustainability work requires a centeredness and authenticity about who we really are and what we believe. While academic culture is well practiced at educating the mind for critical reasoning, writing, and scientific analysis, Zajonc (2010) argues for the equal importance of the systemic cultivation of our hearts. Especially in academic settings that may promote alienation and disconnection (Owen-Smith, 2010), a practice of self-care is vital for sustainability leaders. Furthermore, since we are fundamentally interconnected parts of the earth and other living beings, our way of being has significant impact on the state of the earth and vice versa. Our own health is in fact a part of the greater planetary well-being or its distress. In this sense, self-care is not simply a way to cope with a stressful or difficult culture. It is rather a practice of nurturing change, both inner change and more systemic sustainable change. Through an ethic and practice of care, which begins with care of the self in an understanding of interbeing, we help create a more resilient and flourishing world.

Thus it is important for emerging sustainability leaders to be exposed to educational experiences that, in their explicit and implicit pedagogy, value and promote self-care. Students themselves can shed light on self-care, if given the opportunity to reflect on their own inner voices and needs. The following outlines the methodology and results of a research study about sustainability leadership development and self-care.

Methodology

What is presented here is part of a larger action research study about student learning of sustainability leadership and the pedagogical practices that supported this learning in the graduate course Advanced Leadership for Sustainability. From this study, self-care emerged as an area of focus that merited further exploration in relation to sustainability leadership development. This course is a core course in the Leadership for Sustainability Education (LSE) master’s program at a large urban public university that is well known for its emphasis on service learning and sustainability. This study was approved for human subjects by the university’s institutional review board.

Action research has long been used in educational settings to improve practice, as reflective practitioners have sought to improve their own practice and solve problems within educational settings (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Improving practice was a key element of this study in that the results have directly affected the design and teaching of this course, which is offered annually. Action research typically takes on complex problems, focuses on specific contexts, and emphasizes the capacity to resolve problems in real-life situations (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). As the ongoing instructor for this course, I had a vested interest in learning more about how to best improve practice.
teach sustainability leadership and about the impact of my teaching strategies on my students and on our graduate program. This included an interest in learning how to help graduate students cultivate an ethic and practice of self-care. This research included the questions: What are students’ primary goals and priorities for self-care—what do they think they need? How does an explicit focus on self-care in this course impact students’ understanding of themselves as leaders?

**Course design and participants**

This course is the initial course of the master’s program, which all incoming students are required to take together as a cohort each fall. This is one of many sustainability-related courses in this program. Advanced Leadership for Sustainability is an 11-week course that meets once a week for two and a half hours, with an additional 30-hour community-based learning requirement. I designed and implemented the course using an ecological design process, paying attention to integrating thematic content, multiple and nondominant perspectives, a participatory process, and a contextual place-based approach (Burns, 2011). The assignments for the course included attendance and participation; weekly small group discussion meetings, a midterm and final paper on the topic of sustainability leadership; small group leadership presentations; personal reflection assignments including a visual autobiography, a self-care plan, a pre and post personal leadership reflection; and a large group CBL project. Each class session involved a time for “opening circle,” which included breathing, movement, and community-building activities. Other class activities typically included large and small group discussions, activities such as reflective writing, case studies, small group interactive presentations, and time to work on the CBL project. Each week the readings and class activities were centered on a particular theme. These themes were relationships, sustaining ourselves, economic justice, organizational perspectives, traditional ecological knowledge, systems thinking, inquiry and reflection, and knowing self in place. Students read a number of articles and books for this course including *Leadership and the New Science* (Wheatley, 2006) and *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future* (Nelson, 2008).

The self-care plan assignment was created to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on how they would take care of themselves and be holistic in their learning and approach to sustainability leadership. The self-care plan directions were as follows:

Write a 2 page reflection that focuses on your plan to take care of and nurture yourself as you study sustainability leadership this term and beyond. What systems are you part of that need to be part of the plan? What will you need to attend to? How will you find health, balance and community while being a graduate student?

This course had 23 students. Five were male, and 18 were female. Seventeen students were Caucasian, and six were not. These students identified as Native American (2), African American, Micronesian, Asian American, and Latina. There were a variety of ages in the class; students in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s were represented. The majority of students were in their 20s and 30s.

**Data collection and analysis**

The data collected for this study were qualitative. This research is rooted in grounded theory, meaning that results arose from, or were grounded in, the data that was collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory generates a theory or analysis of phenomenon that is grounded in the experience and perceptions of the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Data for the larger study were collected in a variety of ways, including pre and post reflective writing; pre and post surveys; course assignments; researcher memos and lesson plans; final student evaluations of the course, recordings and transcriptions of class sessions, a teaching methods survey, and a postclass focus group interview. All data were collected and coded on an ongoing basis, using the constant comparative method of analysis in order to continually review existing data and compare and categorize new data based on the coding of that data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A research assistant supported this project. His role was to observe, record, and transcribe class sessions; and we discussed the research as it was unfolding, writing researcher memos of our observations and reflections. In this way the research assistant served as another perspective on the comparative analysis of the data. The research assistant also conducted the focus group interview in order to provide space for students to speak freely about their learning without having the professor in the room.

The results that are presented here are the result of themes that emerged from the coded data, primarily related to the self-care plan assignment. As such, specific quotes highlight the themes and are representative of a larger process of open and axial coding. This study is limited in that the results presented here are just one part of a larger study. However, despite these limitations, self-care emerged as an area of focus within the larger study that merited further exploration. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants in order to protect their confidentiality.

**Results**

The following results answer the research questions: What are students’ primary goals and priorities for self-care—what do they
think they need? How does an explicit focus on self-care in this course impact students’ understanding of themselves as leaders?

There were several distinct themes about the meaning of self-care that emerged from students’ self-care plans. The first theme centered on what students said that they planned to do to take care of themselves. It was clear that students had many specific, if somewhat idealized, ideas about self-care as they outlined the things they could do to take care of themselves. Exercise was an important part of most self-care plans, especially as elements they could put into their schedules. Specific exercise plans included yoga, dance, cycling, exercise classes, bouldering, and walking. Body care was noted through goals for a healthy diet and good nutrition, cooking at home, massage, and alternative medicine. Plans for daily spiritual or personal practices included meditation, time outside, gardening, journaling, setting intentions, prayer, breathing, and gratitude.

Rest and renewal was another area of focus within the theme of things to do. This included elements such as getting enough sleep, taking a day off, adding time for self in the calendar, slowing down, limiting technology, and spending time in nature. Alice wrote, “last week I wrote in my planner, read for 30 minutes, then go out in the garden for awhile, sit, enjoy a glass of wine…I gave myself permission ahead of time. It made it so much easier to disconnect and unwind.” Sophie wrote, “This term I have set aside Sunday to be a day of rest…I commit to keeping this one day a week as a time for resting and doing things that give me energy.”

Activities such as reading, singing, music, creating art, “rambling in the woods,” as well as social time with family and friends, were included as rejuvenating activities that would promote self-care. Hazel wrote, “Socializing is very fulfilling for me, I like being with community at events or gatherings where we are enjoying each other’s company.”

The lists of things that students planned to do to take care of various aspects of themselves represented the majority of the focus around self-care. These were mostly things that could be added to a to-do list or calendar. Students’ plans to take care of their physical, spiritual, emotional, and social selves were thoughtful and well intentioned, indicating that they had a fairly clear understanding of their own self-care needs and practices that would support these needs.

Closely related, the challenges and difficulties associated with self-care also arose as a theme in this data. Many students noted difficulties with time management, having schedules that felt too full, or lives full of to-do lists, Post-it notes, schedules, and organization. Sophie wrote, “my life as a student is hectic and can feel compartmentalized and fragmented.” Body pain or injury was noted, as was emotional imbalance. The need to care for family members and the difficulty in saying no were also noted as significant challenges. Willow explained, “I have to realize that the world will not fall apart just because I did not sign up to help with everything and anything that crosses my path.” The difficulties with self-care were prevalent and acknowledged the pressures students felt to take on too much and the struggles they faced with applying self-care as another thing to do in their lives as they grappled with learning sustainability leadership.

However, another key theme related to self-care also emerged from the data, centered on attitudes, frames of mind, or ways of being related to self-care. These ways of being contrasted with the lists of things students planned to do by focusing more on self-care as an inner process or way of becoming. Jane wrote about becoming whole, saying, “I am learning how to care for myself and become a whole sustainability leader so my wheel of life may turn with balance.

Gabby also wrote about wholeness and the importance of not separating areas of her life, being intentional to “let all areas of my life fuse together...to be flexible and adaptable while allowing various systems of my life to overlap.” Another student wrote about his intention to get back to a practice of mindfulness, saying, “recent events blessed me with a few brief glimpses of my collective unity, and my own unique energetic flow and it touched me deeply, reminding me once again what this whole thing is about.”

Several students noted intentions of self-care that had to do with going with the flow. Sofia wrote about “getting to the place of working in a flow instead of a rush.” Bill reflected on the idea of “taking the path of least resistance,” saying, “I think I can feel the importance of these words. Take the path of least resistance, go with the flow, take it easy. I like this way and it makes it easier to take care of one’s self.”

Another student noted the need to be playful and spontaneous. One student discussed her intent to consider her work as joy. Another student wrote about focusing less on doing and more on just being. Living from a place of inspiration and embracing a sense of discovery were also discussed. Some students also highlighted attitudes toward self, including the importance of patience with self, and letting go of the ideal of perfection. Ella wrote that she realized the need to “give myself the gift of reassurance to know that mistakes can be an important part of learning.” Zach wrote, “Personal sustainability entails...being sure to treat the totality of yourself with love, respect, and gratitude at all times.”
These elements of joy, mindfulness, wholeness, inspiration, and self-acceptance all point to a spiritual orientation to self-care, a recognition that it is something larger than self. Rather than self-care being something that an individual can plan and control, these results instead point to an awareness of self-care as a larger connection with the mystery of life, the flow of all things, and interconnectedness. In her self-care plan, Ella referred specifically to this spiritual aspect of self-care, saying, “When I make time to explore my spirituality, I gain a sense of clarity and feel grounded.” These elements represented students’ aspirations of who they wanted to be or become. These ways of being were less likely to be things that could be added to a to-do list or calendar and were more like a how-to-be list, influenced by their values and life teachers.

Additionally, this understanding of self-care as a way of being was closely reflected in a change in students’ understanding of themselves as sustainability leaders. In their final leadership reflections, many students also described sustainability leadership as a way of being, rather than the specific leadership traits or values that they outlined at the beginning of the course. For example, in her final reflection, Gabby wrote that she now understood sustainability leadership as “a shared goal and way of being.” Similarly, Ella described sustainability leadership as a “way of being [that] is inclusive, supportive and thoughtful and can empower and change those affected.” Results from the larger study about pedagogical methods that best supported sustainability leadership development in this course are also relevant here. These results indicated that creating a sense of community, learning from peers, and experiential learning were the most important pedagogical methods for sustainability leadership education, students’ whole selves must be recognized and embraced, if they are to become whole citizens who work for sustainable change in our world. Sustainability learning thus must include a deeper understanding of self-care as a larger connection with the mystery of life, the flow of all things, and interconnected ways. Over the course of the term, students’ conversations in class often came back to self-care, and they began to weave it into the course dialogue in relation to sustainability leadership. Thus it became apparent that an explicit focus on self-care in this course did impact students’ understanding of themselves as leaders. In particular, the self-care plan and continued discussions on self-care served as a way for students to reflect deeply on who they were as leaders.

Discussion

These results, although limited due to small sample size, provide some insight about teaching which seeks to foster an ethic and practice of self-care in sustainability leaders. While this data does not provide any evidence as to whether or not students followed through on their self-care plans, it provides insight into what students perceived to be important elements of self-care and important struggles in the journey to internalizing self-care within a larger academic context of competition and overwork. In particular, the data that emerged from the self-care plans and from the larger study point to the importance of framing self-care as a way of being in sustainability leadership development. The intention of the self-care plan assignment was to explicitly incorporate an emphasis on self-care in this leadership course as a way to acknowledge its importance, and for students to begin to think about self-care in the context of their own leadership development. Many students said they had never been asked about self-care before and certainly not in an academic class. However, what emerged was a more nuanced understanding of self-care and leadership as ways of being that are at their core spiritual. Asking for students’ innate knowledge about themselves and their own self-care supported a holistic exploration of leadership, including its spiritual aspects. Within sustainability leadership education, students’ whole selves must be recognized and embraced, if they are to become whole citizens who work for sustainable change in our world. Sustainability learning thus must welcome and integrate a learner’s whole self into the learning process including her or his intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical selves (Armstrong, 2008; Burns, 2015).

Furthermore, giving students the opportunity to express and reflect on their challenges around self-care and leadership, including
overcommitment, time pressures, and stress, allowed for a deeper understanding of the self as part of interconnected systems. Acknowledging these challenges as an inherent part of the dominant culture (and academic culture), and highlighting that this culture has been internalized, may have been helpful to students in beginning to change their perceptions about themselves and how to engage in self-care and sustainability leadership from an interconnected living systems paradigm.

This opportunity to reflect deeply may also be a way to allow for what Lange (2004) refers to as restorative learning. Restorative learning processes help learners uncover what they already know but what may have been suppressed by dominant life forces. Restorative learning provides opportunities for learners to return to their inner compass and restore relatedness to time, space, body, and relationships (Lange, 2004). This is the work of sustainability education and sustainability leadership development: to provide opportunities for wholeness and interconnectedness as we work to re-story our world. With opportunities to reflect on themselves, both individually and with a learning community, students began to restore their knowledge of themselves and their core values as leaders. This is a transformative inner shift that alters an outward way of being in the world.

As a result of this action research project, my dialogue with students about self-care and my self-care assignment has changed to reflect a more holistic understanding of self-care as a way of being as well as a process of interbeing. This study has also strengthened my understanding of the roles of contemplative and community-building pedagogical practices as significant ways to promote the restorative and transformative learning integral to sustainability leadership development. Contemplative practices serve to connect us to what we find most meaningful, to the spiritual aspects of who we are. These practices also develop greater empathy and communication skills, improve focus and attention, reduce stress, and enhance creativity (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). When practiced in community, relationships and learning are enhanced.

As I seek to engage in transformative teaching and learning that engages multiple dimensions including affective, sociocultural, and spiritual (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006), I recognize the value of contemplative spaces in the learning process. In this study, the class ritual of opening circle was noted as a primary way that the class created community and felt connected to one another (Burns, 2016). By standing in a circle, greeting each other, and engaging in 5–10 minutes of simple meditation exercises and stretching movements, we reconnected to ourselves. After contemplation and quiet, the opening circle included time for engaging in community-building activities. Usually these activities involved sharing a personal challenge, a gratitude, or just a life highlight. This time of acknowledging the spirit and quieting the self, along with reconnecting with each other in meaningful ways and practicing listening and compassion, signaled the importance of the inner work of learning.

Slowing down cultivates mindfulness, community, empathy, and attention to that which is most important—to our relationships with our selves and with each other, because relationships are literally how the world is patterned (Capra, 2002; Wheatley, 2006). We begin to practice interbeing (Kumar, 2002), and this personal consciousness increases an awareness of our connection to all life (Schley, 2006). Considering the interconnectedness of all life (Capra, 2002), and that we are microcosms and the macrocosm (Kumar, 2002), this personal wellness is imperative for planetary wellness; they are one and the same. Acknowledging self-care as a way of being points to the importance of a holistic and interconnected approach to the inner work of sustainability leadership development.

Conclusion

Higher education has the opportunity and indeed the responsibility to educate future sustainability leaders. Addressing complex sustainability challenges requires leaders who are able to do both the outer and inner work of sustainability, and leadership education must prepare students accordingly. Explicitly including an emphasis on self-care in leadership education, and giving students a chance to consider and voice their own self-care needs, may be beneficial to sustainability leadership development. Further, reflecting on self-care within the context of a demanding academic culture and beginning to cultivate self-care as a way of being can be very important to students’ personal development as sustainability leaders. Transforming our ways of knowing and being is inherent in the process of creating healthy, interconnected, just, and resilient systems and communities. Educators can create opportunities for contemplation and connection in order to support a way of being in which the spirit, relationships, and the self are honored. Fostering self-care as a way of being will support emerging sustainability leaders as they engage in collaboratively addressing complex social and ecological sustainability issues.

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Address correspondence to:

Heather Burns, EdD
Assistant Professor
*Leadership for Sustainability Education*
*Educational Leadership & Policy*  
*Graduate School of Education*  
*Portland State University*  
*PO Box 751*  
*Portland, OR 97207*

E-mail: hburns@pdx.edu

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