

# Reflections on the Process of Evolving from a Student of Literature to a Social Work Instructor of Humanism

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**Abstract:** An Instructor of Social Work explores the origination of her love for literature and the humanities. She discusses how and why she infuses the humanities and various forms of literature into her clinical social work courses and what she perceives to be the pedagogical implications of this interdisciplinary approach.

**Keywords:** social work instruction; literature; humanism.

*When you begin to write you're in love with the language, with the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing-if you follow it will take you to places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me...Come with me, the writer is saying to the reader. There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know (Atwood, 1982, pp. 15 & 348).*

It was my first year of high school and I had been cloaked in the insular world of homogeneity (racially/ethnically and socioeconomically speaking) that both my immediate and larger social context afforded me. Harper Lee's (1960) novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, in its' light purple jacket was laid out before me, our class room desks arranged in a circle. Our charismatic and demanding teacher who embodied what it meant to be passionately enthralled with and immersed in the world of literature attempted to transmit this state of ecstatic adornment to us. She provocatively and imploringly stated, "English and literature needs to be your lives!"

Our instructor was animatedly beckoning us to enter into this world of language, poetry and literature. It was within this world that we would become enticed, engulfed, and transfixed by the juxtaposed elements of beauty and horror that comprised the human condition, or in the words of novelist Margaret Atwood (1984), the reality that the "writer" is beckoning the "reader" to "come with me, there is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know" (Atwood, 1984, p.348).

It was my teacher's infectious love for language coupled with the curiosity and pain that Harper Lee's novel evoked within me that heightened my descent, in a manner similar to what novelist Margaret Atwood speaks of, into this world of

literature. My descent into this literary world gave way to the teeming and exhilarating experience of intellectual stimulation that subsumed me. However, this stream of exhilaration was also at times blunted by the anguish and disillusionment that overcame me, as I was forced to confront the harrowing revelations that underpinned the metaphoric image of the mockingbird.

As my love for literature compelled me into this transcendy state of "flow," a sense of consciousness, humanity and justice was incited within me, indelibly and irreparably punctuating my view of myself and the world that surrounded me (Csikszentmihaly, 2008). At the time I searched for but could not find the words to describe this profound, yet, intangible process. It was this process that paralleled in many ways what Atwood depicts as her own evolution in relation to language and writing:

*But as you go on, the writing-if you follow it will take you to places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me (Atwood, 1984, p. 15).*

In my final year of high school I was fortunate enough to have this teacher who initially incited my entry into this world where language transported me "to places (I) never intended to go, showing (me) things (I) would never otherwise have seen" once again. A central piece of my work that year involved my completion of a thesis on "The Role of the Female Artist in Society." After receiving my thesis back from her, I noticed that two pages of her hand written comments were attached. Amidst her feedback were these two statements that particularly resonated with me, as they began to capture and make real what I had struggled to capture within the vernacular of words. "Of all the works and characters you discuss in your thesis the voice of the paper becomes the most intimate and passionate when you discuss the character

of Mick in Carson McCullers (1967), *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter*, it seems as though there was something about this character that really spoke to you.” (Later followed by) “I was right about you, Literature opens up a whole world for you and I will miss you!”

It wasn’t until many years later when I was introduced to what Martha Nussbaum (1995) described as the essentialism of humanity that associative links began to take shape within my mind regarding what my English teacher’s closing comments to me had begun to capture. Nussbaum defines ‘humanity’ as the capacity, “to recognize the worth of human life wherever it occurs and to see ourselves as bound by common human abilities and problems to people who lie at a great distance from us” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 354). Nussbaum asserts that “an ability to see (oneself) not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties to recognition and concern” is pivotal to the development of humanity (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 354). She (Nussbaum) also describes how the capacity for humanity is facilitated through the engendering of what she defines as the “literary imagination.” Nussbaum shares how the cultivation of the ‘literary imagination’ or “the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person” through the medium of “literary works” which “typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences” creates a sense of humanism (Nussbaum, 1995, p.5). She elaborates upon this concept by writing that:

In their (literary works) very mode of address to their imagined reader, they convey the sense that there are links of possibility between the characters and the reader. The reader’s emotions and imagination are highly active as a result. Novels speak to an implicit reader who shares with the character’s certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 7).

It was indeed this transformative process of unleashing my “literary imagination” that had sent me spinning and careening head long into this new and intermediary world of literature that my teacher had recognized in her closing commentary to me. This transcendence into a parallel universe involved a journey that was often eclipsed by the disparate evocations of reverence, horror and awakened

feelings surrounding the need for humanity and social justice. It worked to irreparably shatter my insulated world of pacifying illusion, rendering me into a state of anguished disillusionment or in the words of Nussbaum literature became “disturbing because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one’s own thoughts and intentions” (Nussbaum, 1995, p.7).

Leaving high school behind and entering into college, I grappled with questions surrounding what areas of study I wanted to focus on in college. I saw the intersections that existed between literature, psychology and law. I ultimately double majored in English Literature and Psychology. Through literature I was brought more affectively into the psychological worlds of the characters in various novels. This offered a perspective that breathed life and ‘humanity’ into the technical and often reductionistic components of my psychology textbooks.

After graduating from college, I agonized over what direction to move in for graduate school. I ultimately decided to pursue a Masters of Social Work (MSW) degree which was interrelated with psychology, issues surrounding social justice and essentially engagement in the personal narratives of my clients. I vowed, however, to never abandon my love for literature. Following the completion of my MSW degree I worked in the human services field as a Clinical Social Worker and then entered into a doctoral program in social work. My doctoral program was small and heavily focused on clinical social work and psychodynamic theory which gratified my analytical mind. The Co-Director of our program had been a literature major as well and prior to graduating from our course work I met with her to discuss how to retain my passion for literature and how it might be infused into my writing and teaching.

It was a few years after this discussion that I received my position as a full time instructor of social work. I began teaching courses that were often laden with technical and formalized criteria that at times felt dehumanizing to individuals struggling with mental health issues. In response to this ‘felt’ element of dehumanization, I felt it was incumbent upon me to bring the course material alive in a manner that breathed facets of humanity into the assigned curriculum. I wanted to incite feelings of passion, humanity, intellectual curiosity and critical thinking in my students, in a manner similar to what my high school English teacher had done for me. I attempted to achieve this by challenging my students to take an

interdisciplinary approach to learning. I facilitated this interdisciplinary approach by asking them to make connections to bodies of knowledge that on a more cursory level appeared to be disconnected, such as, a piece of poetry and social work theory and practice.

One of the courses that I have taught adopts a microscopic paradigm to understanding the process of clinical diagnosis. In this course I have utilized assignments that challenge students' to think critically about the clients they are working with and how our larger social context influences the various clinical conditions that clients encounter. This pedagogical approach is intended to dismantle a solely myopic view of the human condition.

An assignment that I have used in the spirit of this pedagogical approach involves reading the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by Thomas Stearns (T.S.) Eliot (1917). The protagonist in T.S. Eliot's poem laments over the question of "Do I dare disturb the universe?" "Do I dare Disturb the Universe? Should I... Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" The protagonist is able to discern and critique the oppressive forces of his world that are subsuming; yet he questions his ability to "force the moment to its crisis." By the close of the poem the protagonist "drowns" in his inability to feel as though he is capable of impacting the world around him or to "disturb the universe." The protagonist in essence is subsumed by his own futility. Reading this poem and asking students how it relates to social work theory and practice exemplifies an activity that I have brought into the classroom. The protagonist in the poem agonizes over whether he should continue to live on the periphery of life, feeling ineffectual yet safe in the position of the passive observer. He does not take risks nor does he dare to leave his mark upon the world. He languishes on the proverbial 'sidelines' of life. By the close of the poem he drowns in feelings of remorse, regret and self-loathing regarding his own inaction (Miller, 2005).

As an instructor I value and strive to create a culture that does not leave students feeling as though they are passive observers who are treading along the periphery of the classroom. I invite them to enter into the heart of their learning, to question, to challenge, to take risks, to make an impact upon their clients' lives, and the larger social world or to, "dare to disturb the universe" and to indeed "force the moment to its crisis." My facilitation of their "literary imaginations" in this manner occurs in an

environment where students are encouraged to become co-actors and creators in their learning process (Nussbaum, 1995).

This teaching philosophy that is grounded in the tenets of co-constructionism can be conceptualized as having postmodern underpinnings. "The postmodern perspective rejects the idea of an objective reality and emphasizes the intersubjectivity of human experience" (McQuaide, 1999, p. 412). Postmodernism emphasizes the paradigm of social constructionism. It privileges the notion that there are multiple realities regarding learning and knowing which we are constantly shaping "intersubjectively" in tandem with one another. "Reality is knowable-its elements and workings can be accurately and replicably discovered, described, and used by human beings. Knowledge arises within communities of knowers – the realities we inhabit are those we negotiate with one another" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, in McQuaide, 1999, p.20).

In an effort to engender a postmodern approach that embraces multiple realities, I have utilized material from sociology and specifically Erving Goffman's (1961, 1974) written perspective of mental health to challenge the 'reality' offered in many text books that mental illness is solely a result of individual pathology. I believe it is imperative when course material is centered in a myopic and medical model paradigm to both challenge and question what is being offered as proverbial "truth(s)" through a juxtaposed sociological lens. Other mediums that I have used are literary in nature, such as, Kay Redfield Jamison's (1995), autobiographical work, *An Unquiet Mind*. In *An Unquiet Mind*, Jamison eloquently and poetically recounts her struggles with Bipolar Disorder making her experiences with the disorder quite palpable from a humanistic standpoint. This level of palpability and evocation transmits an understanding to students that permeates beyond the limits of the criteria listed within our assigned diagnostic manual. I have also introduced passages from Susanna Kaysen's (1993) autobiographical novel *Girl Interrupted*. My integration of Kaysen's work is intended to illuminate the intrapersonal struggles of emotional dysregulation endured by an individual with a mental health issue. In addition, drawing upon this autobiographical account encourages students to both think critically about and to deconstruct the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder from a macroscopic lens.

This literary integration has been met with varied responses from students over the years. The overall tenor of student responses has been positive. I have had students exclaim, "I love this!" and it has

generally entered into my student evaluations positively. Students have written that they appreciate the level of “creativity” that I bring into the classroom. However, on one occasion I had a student write in my evaluation that she felt it was an unnecessary component of the course. I have also infrequently had students voice their anxieties surrounding their feelings of “incompetence” regarding the analysis of poetry and literature. When this concern emerges, I assure students that this is “ok.” I also assure them that I am aware that the integration of literature may not resonate with everyone and that it is not a classroom activity that they are going to be graded on, additionally clarifying that a lack of verbal response to this material will not impact their classroom participation grade.

Based upon my own culmination of experiences with integrating literature into my clinical social work courses, I would advise that the provision of preparation and context is crucial. I always let students know ahead of time that I am going “to do something a bit different in class today” before introducing a poem or a short literary piece.

I provide them with my reasoning and rationale for integrating literature in this manner, recognizing that on the surface it appears disconnected to the course material but why upon closer scrutiny I view it as connected. I also provide students with a few open ended questions to guide them in their thinking about the literary piece so that they feel more anchored as they descend into what may feel like uncharted territory.

In addition, after writing their thoughts or responses to the guided questions down, I have students create small groups where they can freely exchange their thoughts with one another before their group is asked to voluntarily share their discussions with the rest of the class. This alleviates the anxieties of students who do not feel as competent in this area, because they know they are not being “singled out,” as they have become members of a voluntary group process.

Perhaps, most importantly, I have also found that it is essential for me to ‘know’ my students and to remain attuned to the ever fluctuating ‘pulse’ of my classroom. If upon reflection and evaluation I find that the integration of literature is not pedagogically effective and meaningful for a particular student group, as with any other mode of instruction, I will elicit student feedback and revise my approach

based upon student input. If the integration of literary pieces continues to feel ineffective, I discontinue it as a pedagogical approach.

My passion to infuse various literary works into my teaching in this manner also compelled me to enter into curriculum development with faculty members from two other disciplines. Together we created an interdisciplinary course entitled, “Humanities for the Professions.”

This course development was probably the most challenging curriculum work that I have been tasked with to date. It involved the joining of materials from various areas of concentration that initially felt disconnected and I was challenged with discovering how they could become interconnected. I worked to develop assignments from this material that incited the capacity to think critically and to garner a sense of humanism in undergraduate students whose education was preparing them for a professional field. It was while I was reading and considering the integrative use of materials for sections of this course that I was charged with creating that I came across Martha Nussbaum’s (1995) work entitled *Poetic Justice*.

Ironically it was my reading of *Poetic Justice* so many years later in my capacity as an instructor that provided me with the words (literary imagination and the cultivation of humanity) that had eluded me as an initial student of literature so many years earlier. These words described what had been awakened within me by my own instructor who had set me on an indelible path of transformation. It was this indelible path that cultivated a passion for literature, a sense of humanity and a commitment to social justice that drove me to become a teacher who strives to incite what Nussbaum defines as a capacity for “literary imagination” in my own students.

It was the development of my literary capacities that facilitated my own profound sense of humanism. The use of literature in my own teaching reminds me of what inspired and excited me about learning as a student. It continues to fuel me with feelings of intensity, passion and exhilaration as an instructor that I hope to infectiously transmit to my students. It breathes ‘life’ into me, in essence providing me with what I need to be able to “supply oxygen” to my classroom and “to create an inspiring, challenging environment that enables learning to take place.”

It is through the creation of this environment that I strive to embody and elicit what I hold to be the most essential facet of an ‘education,’ “the awakening of a



human being” (Rawlings, 2015).

*Good teachers ‘supply oxygen’ to their classrooms. Professors need to inspire, to prod, to irritate, to create engaging environments that enable learning to take place. Genuine education is not a commodity, it is the awakening of a human being* (Rawlings, 2015).

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