

The Journey to Serve the World through Continuing Education

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Abstract: This article presents my reflections of my call, response, and commitment to serve the world through continuing education opportunities that build the capacity of clinical social workers and counselors. I discuss the journey that began with my dissertation project and ended with the local, state, and global service of facilitating continuing education. The article also demonstrates the movement from building capacity through live workshops to utilizing E-learning.

Keywords: continuing education, professional development, electronic capacity building, continuing education network

Introduction *Hearing the Call*

“There are three steps in living life on purpose. They are hearing the call, responding to the call, and committing to the call.” These were not new words to me but hearing them in the context of a seminary graduation speech (June, 2012) added new meaning. Social work itself requires hearing a call to serve vulnerable populations, responding to the call, selecting how you will serve, and committing to the call of which vulnerable populations you will serve. Living my life on purpose means serving as a social work educator and equipping domestic and global social workers and counselors to provide strength-based interventions and strategies that empower vulnerable populations.

I heard a specific call to serve the world through providing continuing education and professional development to social workers, counselors, and caregivers when I was designing my dissertation project. My call was so clear to me that I made a vow the day I defended my dissertation.

When the questions “What will you do with the knowledge you have gained to serve our world and equip others for the work of the ministry?” and “How will you engage in the expression of fundamental commitments related to self-care and personal growth necessary to minister for yourself and for others?” were asked during my dissertation defense (T. Wardle, personal communication, April 2012), I was able to passionately respond. I answered, “I will provide continuing education opportunities for licensed social workers and counselors.” This promise led me on a domestic and international continuing education voyage to utilize facilitating continuing education workshops as my agent of change to the world.

Serving the World through the Public Service of Continuing Education in my Community *Responding to the Call*

Continuing education is not a destination; it is a journey. I immediately responded to the call domestically and packed my professional briefcase with opportunities to provide continuing

education. The first stop was in 2011, when as director of continuing education of Mind, Body, and Soul (MBS), the non-profit cofounded by my husband, I began offering several free continuing education workshops to educators, social workers, youth leaders, and pastors within the Mahoning Valley. Shortly after, MBS became a continuing education provider registered with the Ohio Counselor, Social Worker, and Marriage and Family Therapist Board. In 2012, I met with my mentor, Dr. Joseph Mosca, about assisting in fulfilling part of the James and Coralie Centofanti Center for the Health and Welfare of Vulnerable Populations' mission to establish a process for planning and coordinating continuing education (focused on expanding their scope for effectiveness in working with vulnerable populations) to health and human service professionals in the regional community.

During our meeting, I stated, "I propose that you consider allowing me to serve as the Continuing Education Director of the James and Coralie Centofanti Center for the Health and Welfare of Vulnerable Populations and offer workshops to social workers and counselors as a public service from the Center." Dr. Mosca (personal communication, March 2013) responded, "Well, it is part of our mission and we have not begun to offer these yet. I'll partner with you through Mind, Body, and Soul to offer a few workshops to counselors and social workers in the area as a public service. We will offer them at no cost to the participants. If there is a response, we will offer more."

There was a great response; for over five years I offered over 20 workshops in partnership with the Centofanti Center and independently for MBS to a consumer base of approximately 326 licensed counselors and social workers. As the participation grew to the largest workshop attendance of 135, the interest and requests grew, and I began to specialize in workshops related to trauma, mindfulness, and spirituality. Some of the workshop topics were Forgiveness, The Real F Word; The Other F Word: Self-Forgiveness; Healing the Wounded Soul; Sexual Abuse Recovery and the Christian Client: Solution-Focused Therapy; Trauma-Informed Clinical Supervision; Worried Sick: Breaking Free from Chronic Worry and Anxiety; EMDR and Mindfulness; Unglued: A Look at Anger Reactions; The Clinical Coach; The Ethical Dilemma of Self-Care; and Spirituality and the Treatment Process.

According to the consumers, my continuing education workshops were "engaging and provided opportunities to practice the skills that were introduced." On a scale of one to five with five being excellent, the workshops averaged a four. The feedback increased my confidence and strengthened my commitment.

From 2011 to 2015, I was able to respond to the call of providing continuing education workshops through MBS and the James and Coralie Centofanti Foundation, serve as CEU Coordinator of Youngstown State University, and serve as presenter to local and state professional development conferences for social workers. It had been four years and the call to serve as social work continuing education educator was still knocking on my door.

Serving the World through Continuing Education Abroad ***Hearing the Global Call***

In 2016, my territory enlarged, and the journey led me to presenting professional development workshops abroad. Serving as a continuing education provider abroad changed my perspective of continuing education. While providing continuing education in Haiti and in Israel, I realized that as a practitioner in the United States, I have the right, responsibility, and privilege of continuing education. While conducting a faculty-led service learning in Haiti and following a Self-Care and Vicarious Trauma continuing education workshop for staff, I had a conversation with Stephanie, the director of the Special Needs Orphanage, and she identified the privilege of continuing education and the need in Haiti. With guilt I asked,

Sherri: “How can I best serve you during our next visit?”

Stephanie: “Our special needs family experiences a lot of grief within their lives due to the demands of caring for a special needs child with little resources and a high death rate. During your next visit, it would be helpful if you provided a training for our staff on grief and assisted in writing a booklet on understanding grief.”

Stephanie was not the only staff member who requested assistance in continuing education. Other departments requested that on our next visit our team provide the staff with continuing education on trauma-informed care, grief counseling, boundaries and healthy relationships, solution-focused therapy, and the strengths-based approach to integrate Christian faith into the workshops. I had a similar experience while conducting a faculty-led study abroad in Israel and facilitating a continuing education at the Galilee Medical Center.

During my presentation, *Bilateral Stimulation as a Resource for Holocaust and Syrian Refugee War Survivors*, it was noted that the social workers serving at this hospital could benefit from continuing education opportunities. I again asked the question,

Sherri: “How can I best serve you during our next visit?”

Hanna (Director of the Social Work Department of the Galilee Medical Center): “The technique you shared is simple and easy to apply with patients who are receiving trauma recovery treatment. I hope you return and on your next visit, we can arrange more time for presenting professional development and growth workshops.”

By March 2019, my call to serve the world as a social work educator through continuing education was becoming more defined and more challenging. Answering this call was contingent upon my returning to those countries, my available resources, and my available time. Yet, there was a desire to respond to the deficit of continuing education in third world countries and specific topics that integrated spirituality into the treatment process. New questions surfaced within my life of service. I became plagued by questions: What happens to health professionals who serve vulnerable populations who have experienced trauma in remote areas that have limited access to continuing education? What can be done to address the de-isolation of these

care professionals? How can we empower them to serve those recovering from horrific trauma? What would happen if the care professionals became civically engaged in building the future of continuing education around the world?

There was a solution. I would continue to offer continuing education opportunities to remote global areas when permitted, but I would also develop virtual E-learning continuing education opportunities. I have a dream. A dream that care professionals of all ages, ethnicities, and gender will have the same access to effective and quality continuing education. I believe that professionals can provide continuing distance education online training to expand the capacity of professional competence and growth for the under-resourced.

The Vision of Growing Capacity through Continuing Education E-learning *Responding to the Global Call*

E-learning is an evolutionary pedagogy in social work that transforms learning so that it can be synchronous and asynchronous. E-learning can be cost-effective and an asset for rural populations (Phelan, 2015). In April 2019, I wrote down my agenda to growing professional competence in local and international social workers and counselors that involves creating an agenda for action. Interwoven in every university are the goals of teaching, scholarship, and service.

Establishing electronic continuing education is a place to join the network that I am building through service learning and study abroad with the regional, national, and international needs of affordable continuing education. These continuing education workshops have an agenda for action and provide professionals an opportunity to share their expertise with others as a form of service. The virtual model of open access continuing education will provide opportunities to those who service vulnerable populations all over the world to increase their professional growth. Building an electronic continuing education repository will expand the capacity of professional development and growth for licensed social workers and counselors around the world.

The Plan

The plan for delivering virtual continuing education can be realized through the collective resources of the Health and Human Services College of Youngstown State University (YSU). YSU has invested in “Classrooms of the Future” that are equipped with Cisco Spark Stations—touch-based collaboration devices that expand the classroom beyond its four walls. These classrooms are resources for faculty and staff. My plan is to use the Classrooms of the Future resource and video storage system as a potential to offer online continuing education.

The end goal is for faculty of the Health and Human Service Professionals to utilize these classrooms as a platform for teaching, learning, and service within continuing education. In the meantime, the plan begins with me being the change agent—starting the change with my own service.

The Reality

The reality is that a dream is just a dream until you plainly write the vision and move on the action steps to implement it. A vision without movement is just an uncolored picture. Having vision and being a visionary can feel like a curse. You see in panoramic view what will happen, but you have to do the work to *move* toward what you see. However, when I honestly examined the movement of my call to build the capacity of continuing education opportunities globally, what I could see was not important—because I simply hadn't done enough from March 2019 to October 2019 to examine. Around October, I became frustrated. I was writing the manuscript for this journal for the Special Topics: Continuing Education issue and noticed everything I was writing was about “what had happened to lead to this point” and “what would happen.” There was little to show of action and commitment to the global call. My last live global presentation had been in March 2019.

I spoke to my best friend and accountability partner who is also a social worker and counselor. She said, “Faith is not knowing all parts of your vision. Continue to write the plan and move as though it is going to happen. Look for opportunities and when they come, take advantage of them.” This was easy for her to say, but I do not believe she knew that I was ready to give up. This continuing education vision to change the world one workshop at a time was like an overdue baby that I had carried for over seven years. I said to myself, “If something does not happen soon, I will abort the birth of the vision.” Then came Rwanda.

The Appeal

A call to service always includes a direct appeal. Rwanda's greatest challenge in mental health is the development of mental health workforce capacity. According to World Health Organization's (2018a) *Mental Health Atlas 2017*, there were only 234 mental health professionals in the country. This translates to roughly one specialist per 50,000 inhabitants. Of them, 45 were psychologists (1 per 250,000), 7 were psychiatrists (1 per 1.6 million), and 20 were social workers (1 per 600,000). In November 2019, while in Kigali, Rwanda, at a Multicultural Trauma Training and site visit for a future service learning course, as my friend had said, an opportunity arose for me to build capacity within the field of mental health through continuing education.

When the facilitator became sick, I was given an opportunity and I committed to present a Vicarious Trauma and Self-Care workshop to Rwandan social workers, community health workers, psychiatric nurses, and psychologists. The presentation included faith-based interventions for addressing compassion fatigue, burnout, vicarious trauma, and developing a self-care plan. Following the presentation, the participants responded with appeals that affirmed the need and my ability to meet the need.

Participant 4: “This was the best part of the conference. I feel as though you provided me with tools I can take home and use.”

Participant 22: “God is important to me and you included God.”

Participant 31: “You have perfect skills for teaching.”

Participant 17: “I like that I learned that I have to heal myself first.”

Participant 9: “I like that you gave so many tools to use.”

There were many comments from the Rwandan and international delegates that affirmed that continuing education was needed and that I was equipped to offer engaging continuing education.

The conversation that meant the most and served as the midwifery for me to actually give birth to the true vision of changing the world through continuing education was with Agnes. As we ate lunch, she described the lack of professionals in the mental health field and the impact the vicarious trauma that practitioners who work with survivors of the genocide face because they, too, are survivors. Agnes talked about her faith-based agency and the need for training and her desire to include faith-based continuing education as part of their agenda. I shared with her my dream and vision and how my own lay counselors curriculum, *Journey Coaching Curriculum* (Woods, 2019) could build the capacity of non-professionals and address mental health needs at the non-severe level. She asked: “When are you coming back to teach us more?” I responded, “Perhaps in 2021.” She replied, “Many will be spiritually and emotionally dead by then. You must come back next year.”

Global Continuing Education and E-Learning Modules *Committing to the Call*

The Commitment in Action

Here was another opportunity that my friend had placed in front of me. Here was the chance to move from dream to vision and from vision to vision fulfilled. Here was an opportunity to commit to another global live workshop and to develop the E-learning modules that could be shared with Haitian, Israeli, and Rwandan practitioners. So... I did it. I went beyond hearing and responding to the call—I committed to the call. I had planned to return in June 2020 to train social workers, community health workers, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, pastors, youth leaders, and faith-based agency leaders in the *Journey Coach Curriculum* (Woods, 2019).

I have written the curriculum. The *Journey Coach Curriculum* (Woods, 2019) is a faith-based, strengths-based, trauma-informed social therapy lay counseling model that will increase mental health workforce capacity of non-specialized professions. It integrates evidence-based interventions of mental health counseling, spiritual direction, spiritual formation, mindfulness, and meditative practices to reduce stress, depression, pain, eating disorders, general anxiety, and other mild trauma-related stressors. The purpose of the training aligns with the World Health Organization (2018b) to improve the availability of non-specialized workers, build opportunities for task-sharing of non-specialized workers, provide self-delivered interventions for mild to moderate conditions, and develop informal care by community networks. I have partnered with Global Engagement Institute and had planned to provide the continuing education training as a

pilot in Kigali, Rwanda, in June 2020 to address the need for the integration of spirituality in the healing process of trauma growth and recovery.

As of January 2020, I have further actualized my plan to expand quality education. Utilizing the YSU Classrooms of the Future, I have captured the traditional lecture-based learning environment through Cisco Webex recording. I utilized the assistance of the Youngstown State University Tech Training Coordinator of IT Customer Services. With her assistance, the YSU Classrooms of the Future, and Cisco Webex, I now have six E-modules that can be shared with local and global practitioners in the countries where I have already offered live workshops (Haiti, El Salvador, Israel, and Rwanda).

It happened when I merged my commitment to offering local continuing education with the technology resources available. Within January, I offered six live continuing education workshops on the topics of managing anger reactions, trauma-informed supervision, dialectical behavior therapy, shame, forgiveness, and anxiety to local social workers and counselors. These workshops were hosted in YSU Classrooms of the Future, which allowed me to record the live sessions utilizing Cisco Webex Go to Meeting and my personal computer. These recorded modules have been edited into E-modules. Now instead of talking about what I can do, I can share the recordings of live presentations and PowerPoints as E-modules with Haiti, Israel, Rwanda, and any other populations that are under-resourced in the area of continuing education.

The Future Response and Commitment

I have heard the call, I have responded to the call, and finally, I have committed to the call and stretched continuing education beyond four walls. I can say in present tense that continuing education is my agent of change. There is an evident interest in the special topic of integrating spirituality into the trauma growth and recovery process. Moving forward, I will offer more live workshops on these subjects and will continue to record these sessions into E-modules that can be shared locally and globally.

The initial plan has been adapted due to the restrictions of COVID-19 and live workshops being cancelled. However, three virtual workshops have been shared with paraprofessionals in Rwanda through virtual platforms. I have continued to develop the E-modules and more will be shared as synchronous virtual workshops in spring 2021 as the countries open back up. The continuing education workshop to integrate spirituality into the treatment of trauma that was scheduled for June 2020 in Kigali, Rwanda, was cancelled due to COVID-19. The team of licensed counselors, social workers, and trained lay counselors plan to respond to the appeal of the Rwandan practitioners and present the *Journey Coach Curriculum* (Woods, 2019) when it is safe to do so.

What a difference a few months can make on a journey! The rapid change in my response and commitment just reminds me that the call to serve the world through continuing education is a journey and not a destination. I am no longer frustrated. I feel grateful, empowered, and confident that the E-module webinars and the live Rwanda workshops are only the beginning of the journey to serving the world through live and E-learning continuing education workshop opportunities.

References

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