

# Reflections: The Relational Practice of Teaching and Learning

Meaghan Dougherty

**Abstract:** In this essay, I reflect upon how research I conducted on social service workers' transition from post-secondary education to work has influenced my approach to teaching and learning. Drawing parallels to my own transition experiences, I examine how key findings from the research—including transition being a continual process, “not knowing” being an asset, and the importance of truly “being with” others—have important implications for relational practice and pedagogy. Reflecting on my developing approach to teaching and learning, I encourage educators to rethink the importance of relational processes in educational encounters. Critically questioning our role as educators generates possibilities for social change; we can disrupt ideas about education which are taken for granted and transgress dominant ways of “being” in the classroom.

**Keywords:** relational pedagogy, social service workers, school-to-work transition, ethics of care

I am a post-secondary educator working in a comprehensive college in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. I worked in social services before transitioning into the classroom. In this paper, I explore how my approach to teaching and learning has developed through my transitions from social service work to teaching to doctoral research and beyond. I draw primarily on key ideas that arose from social service workers' narratives on their transition from school to work that catalyzed critical examination and rethinking of the importance of relational processes in educational encounters. Relational encounters can shape social change for students, institutions, and education. Below, I discuss my research and my connection to the participants' narratives. Then I reflect on relational pedagogical processes and explore what may be made possible when educational encounters generate the potential for social change.

## Researching: Exploring the Experiences of Social Service Workers

Before I began my doctoral program, I started teaching in an applied diploma program for students interested in working in social services. During this time, I was teaching and overseeing a portfolio of youth programs at a not-for-profit social service agency. Generally, social service positions—like those my students would be working toward—involve working, primarily on the front line, with children, youth, adults, and families who face multiple vulnerabilities. Distinct from social work, social service work is more explicitly multidisciplinary and less professionalized. Social service positions are often vulnerable due to government underfunding and, as they involve close relational work with individuals with complex needs, can lead to vicarious trauma, toxic stress, and burnout (Cohen & Collens, 2013). Despite my familiarity with the challenges of the work, my belief in my early days of teaching (arguably commonplace in the college environment) was that I knew what these students needed to know by virtue of my time spent working in social services. I thought that my expertise came from my professional experience and I could relay the necessary content to ensure the students had the requisite skills and competencies to be effective social service workers upon graduation. I thought the relationship between curricular content and practice skills was very straightforward.

Despite my own experience in the field, I approached my role as educator with little consideration of the importance of *relationship*; I had lost touch with the relational aspect of social service work and its importance in facilitating meaningful change. Relational practice recognizes that interactions (and interventions) occur in the spaces between us (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). That is, potential for growth exists in relationship—in the connections we create with others. Engaging in relational practice means co-constructing safe and respectful space and creating mutual relationships where we can connect, engage, and be with others (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). Relational practice involves intentionally and actively participating in the lives of others, meeting people where they are at, and “doing *with*” rather than “doing *to*” (Garfat & Fulcher, 2012). It is through this safe, mutual relationship that change occurs. While I discussed the importance of connection and relationship in my courses, my approach to teaching and learning revealed that I wasn’t considering its integral role in developing social service workers. It was through my doctoral studies and dissertation research that the importance of relational practice came back into focus for me—not only for social service workers, but also for me as an educator.

Throughout my doctoral studies in education, I reflected on the purpose of education and my role as an educator. Is post-secondary education a training ground for future employment? Or is it a place to investigate and critique ideas, assumptions, and beliefs and open oneself to growth and development? Some elusive combination of the two? Am I presenting information to be internalized and applied in practice, or am I creating space where students can explore who they are and what they are bringing to their relational work with clients? Although I had been teaching in post-secondary, my examination of my role as an educator and my pedagogical approach was theoretical; learning to teach was not a part of my doctoral training (Chen et al., 2020). Instead, I experimented with various instructional techniques, collaborated with colleagues, and tried to apply my theoretical learning to practice (Oktay et al., 2013). I reflected on my role within the post-secondary system and the tensions and contradictions involved in a system with multiple and conflicting aims. I was guided by an ethic to promote student learning and, ultimately, more effective practice. I wanted to improve the experience of social service workers in their time as students, throughout their transition to work, and into their professional roles. I assumed better support would allow them to effectively care for their clients, promoting consistent relationships to provide foundation from which clients could make change. I hoped that these connections, built on respect and dignity, could culminate to promote social justice. I sought to improve employability for students but also to help them develop into self-aware, genuine practitioners.

Understanding the complexity of the educational system, the social service system, and the relationship between them seemed to bring more questions than answers. I became curious about how students experienced the neoliberal institutions of school and work and how they navigated their transition between the two. In neoliberal contexts, social functions, like education, are reduced to market transactions (Ball, 2012a) and commodified, so they can be purchased and sold for profit, like all other commodities (Ball, 2012b). Given the apparent tension between social service work (emphasizing empathy and social welfare) and neoliberal institutions (emphasizing competition, efficiency, and maximizing profit), I was interested in how social service workers navigate these systems and make sense of these tensions.

Engaged in these tensions and daunting questions about post-secondary education and work, I recognized that I wanted to find out more from students who, like mine, had transitioned into social service work. Social service workers participate in an increasingly marketized educational system that emphasizes employability and individual financial success—yet they transition into an increasingly precarious labor market (Livingstone, 2019) with high risk of burnout (Cohen & Collens, 2013). Social service work involves relational engagement with clients shaped by and situated in significant social conditions, yet this work is constrained by technocratic managerialist expectations. That is, the complex clients of social service workers are constituted in and constrained by intersecting social systems of poverty, white supremacy, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression that increase their risk for trauma and violence. Social service workers provide support within these oppressive systems *and* advocate for systemic change while also demonstrating (through performance measures and funding reports) how they are minimizing cost and maximizing output. Real tensions exist between the lived realities of the clients and the performance measures used to assess and evaluate the work being done with the clients. Given these tensions, how do social service workers, whose role emphasizes empathy and social welfare, navigate systems based on competition and efficiency? What do they bump up against in their transition from school to work? How do they see, know, and describe themselves as “students” and “workers,” and how do they enact various identities across social, political, and institutional contexts?

To explore their experience, I engaged in a series of interviews with five social service workers who identified themselves as new to the field. The five participants—whom I have called Elizabeth, Carolyn, Hannah, Alison, and Matthew—worked in various not-for-profit social service agencies across the Lower Mainland of British Columbia with distinct mandates and different client groups. The agencies differed in size, funding, organizational culture, and approach, and the participants held various positions within these agencies. These positions involved relief/on-call, contract, and part- and full-time positions working with school-age children, youth, and adults facing various challenges, including substance use, mental health concerns, homelessness, trauma, learning challenges, cognitive delays, and criminal justice involvement.

In my interviews with these participants, I positioned my work within critical narrative inquiry, where I saw the narrative and the narrator as co-constituted and dynamic and recognized the power of the stories to disrupt hegemonic narratives (Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2013). At the initial interview, we discussed the participant’s current employment, educational trajectory, and their transition experiences. Then, drawing from the audio recording of our interview, my field notes, and my written reflections on the interview, I created a written narrative account that I shared with the participant at our next meeting. The narrative account was a re-storied version of our conversation, including my responses after the fact. The narrative account provided the basis for the next interview, allowing the participant to discuss in more detail any areas they felt were pertinent; this discussion then became the next co-created narrative account, and so on.

In repeated listenings of the audio recordings and in the co-creation of the series of narrative accounts, I connected affectively with the participants’ commitment and passion for improving the lives and conditions of those they work with. I listened as each participant described

situations where their clients were discarded, ignored, or mistreated and how they intervened to advocate for the clients' needs. I was moved and inspired by participants' descriptions of their work and their approach to building therapeutic relationships. For example, Carolyn discussed finding strength in the hard moments with the young people she worked with. She described sitting with a youth who was distraught and had nowhere to go, listening to and honoring his experience. In that moment, "being *with*" took precedence over problem-solving. I found myself relating to the participants. Hannah discussed feeling frustrated by what she perceived to be a lack of respect from colleagues because she was young and new to the field; as she spoke, that same feeling of frustration bubbled within me as I remembered very similar experiences when I began working in social services. I could feel the tensions the participants described navigating as they attempted to balance relational work with the technocratic expectations of the agencies they work within. For example, both Hannah and Alison discussed feeling the need to justify their work through formalized paperwork—and reported that it did not capture the relational nature of their practice. Ironically, Matthew stated that completing paperwork *detracted* from time with clients.

Despite the challenges, I felt the participants' strength in maintaining hope and celebrating incremental progress while feeling defeated by the enormity of social injustice. Alison articulated the tension she felt in celebrating youth's safety when they were at her center while also recognizing that the rest of their days were marked with the risk of violence and trauma. She felt like no matter what she did, it was never enough. I felt, in the participants' stories, how power worked both on and through them as they performed their roles, toward the ideal of a social service worker, while also resisting and resignifying what their roles meant (for complete analysis, see Dougherty, 2019). I also found myself caught up in the affective intensities of their experiences of transition and of relational practice; their stories stuck with me and I found myself thinking about and thinking through some of their ideas that had both surprised and inspired me.

The key ideas from the narratives that I want to highlight for the purposes of this essay have important implications for relational practice and pedagogy and are interrelated: Transition is not a distinct event but a continual process, "not knowing" is an asset in relational work, and relational work involves truly "being with" others.

First, the participants discussed transition as ongoing. Transition was not a distinct stage (Ashton & Ashton, 2016) between school and work: School, work, and transition existed together in dynamic arrangements. For the social service workers, their relational work is continual transition—their clients, their material conditions, the agency, the social environment, frameworks for addressing client needs, and the social service workers themselves are in a process of *becoming* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005). Becoming is an ongoing transition. It is an unfinalizable process, involving the "replacement of static conceptions of things through the creation of dynamic conceptions of processes in continual transition" (Grosz, 2005, p. 10). The social service workers discuss this ongoing navigation as feeling "in-between" (Carolyn) and being a state of "still figuring it out" (Hannah), recognizing that they themselves and the expectations of their role are continually developing. For example, Carolyn articulates transition as ongoing questions about her self, her role, and her future:

My story seems to show some ambivalence about what my future will hold and shows that I still have a lot of questions—what will my future hold? What does it mean to be a professional? I think it shows that transition can be a struggle but if you work hard, eventually you will be going through it.

It is interesting that in her reflection, Carolyn noted transition not as something that is completed (you get through it) but ongoing (you will be going through it).

Second, given this context of ongoing transition, the social service workers highlighted the importance of uncertainty, recognizing that they are not in an expert role, and embracing “not knowing.” As their clients, themselves, their role, the expectations of the role, knowledge about therapeutic relationships, and the social environment are continually developing, the social service workers are always learning. They are not entering their role as experts who impose their agenda on their clients; they embrace “not knowing” and seek to understand by building and nurturing relationships with others. For Hannah, although she recognizes she likes to have all the answers, it is not necessary for her role:

Expertise may be a personal thing for me. That may be me searching to be really good at something. Or wanting to have all the answers because I’m new. It is important to me but isn’t really important to the job. It is important to just be present and give it your all.

Hannah highlights that she doesn’t need to pressure herself to be the expert; instead, she emphasizes the importance of being present in relational practice, something that *is* needed to foster deep relationships.

Lastly, coming into their working relationships with clients from this place of “not knowing” allowed social service workers to truly “be with” their clients, to meet them where they were at, seek to understand their experience, and be awake and alert to emergent possibilities. To truly “be with” another involves bringing one’s genuine self to the relationship, recognizing the dignity and humanity of the other, and attending to the other with empathy. Alison articulately explained her approach with her youth clients who struggle with addiction, mental health, and homelessness:

That mindset of “not knowing” takes the pressure off needing to have answers to huge structural and social problems that don’t currently have answers. I work through the problem on a case-by-case basis, in terms of “where can I get a meal?” and it makes it more tangible. School has a very grand focus on social justice and it is humbling to recognize that making tea and checking in with someone while they watch cartoons is an act of social justice because no one else is checking in with them to see if they’re okay. Recognizing that each youth is worthy of respect and dignity. I think it does make a difference. It is really just about seeing people and attending to them. (Alison)

Alison highlights the humility involved in “not knowing” and embracing uncertainty. Alison does not enter relationships with her clients as an expert or move into interventions that may or

may not be helpful; she meets the client where they are and treats them with respect and dignity. She attends to them and ensures, in tangible ways in that moment, that they are okay. Alison's approach allows her to really see her clients and attend to them, allowing opportunities to emerge from their encounter. These ideas of continual becoming, embracing "not knowing," and truly "being with" others and the emergent opportunities that arise from those encounters stuck with me as a way of being.

In the following sections, I reflect on how these relate to who I am—as a person and as an educator—and how I understand teaching and learning. I think these reflections may catalyze other educators to reflect on their own relational practice in the classroom, and beyond. I also explore how a relational pedagogy may catalyze broader social change.

### **Connecting: Seeing Myself in the Participant Narratives**

I learned a great deal in researching the experiences of social service workers, and I found parallels between my participants' experiences and in my own. Recognizing these parallels helped me translate my learning into my approach to teaching and learning, which I discuss after exploring these parallels.

First, I recognized that, like my participants, I was (and still am) in a process of continual transformation. I did not experience distinct stages of post-secondary education, transition, and work; instead, my doctoral studies and my work in social services and in teaching in post-secondary existed together, co-constituting, intertwined, and informing one another. I recognized that I experienced and performed a multiplicity of roles, and that I, too, bumped up against tensions between these roles. I had to navigate the relational needs of my students in their learning with the technocratic requirements of the institution. I had to work within educational policies that didn't adequately account for the lived experiences of the students. I had to find ways to creatively account for these realities within narrow assessment and reporting requirements. I had to perform toward what was expected of me in my roles—both as doctoral student and as post-secondary educator—while determining how I could resignify those roles to do meaningful, intentional work with students. That is, how could I work both within and against the dominant roles of doctoral student and educator to truly "be with" students? As a becoming-researcher, my understandings of knowledge and what is *possible* to know transformed. I was studying transition while in transition—exploring the participants' becomings while I was "becoming with the data" (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 265). My understanding of transition was thus informed by my own ongoing transition, and my becoming was shaped by my involvement in the research and my participants' narratives of becoming. I was made different by my interactions with the participants; our conversations and co-constructed narratives continued to help me think differently, long after the interviews themselves had ended.

Second, within this process of becoming, I found I had much to grasp. Paradoxically, the more I learned about education, pedagogy, social service work, relational practice, and research, the more I realized how little I knew. My process of becoming involved embracing "not knowing," deconstructing my own assumptions about what was right and true, and allowing myself to

engage in an ongoing process of seeking to understand. I could focus on critically questioning what I thought I knew and open myself to other perspectives, experiences, and ideas. I reassessed my ideas of expertise. Rather than seeing “not knowing” as a deficit or detriment, I found it offered a generative way of approaching the world. Knowledge itself is undergoing continual transition, so, while I can keep learning and growing, I will never be finished. I can never truly “know.” Becoming involves ongoing development; I learned—and continue to learn—through my interactions with (among others) teachers, doctoral students, colleagues, scholars, friends, and my students. As a becoming-researcher, I critiqued my initial idea of researching gaps in competencies and adjusting curriculum to fill those gaps. This deficit-focused intervention approach failed to account for the complexity of learning, becoming, and relational practice involved in social service work. As a becoming-educator, I questioned my original focus on content and curriculum and presenting information as an expert. I thought I could fill students with the information needed to be effective practitioners; once they had the necessary knowledge and competencies, they would be ready. I failed to account for the dynamism of these individuals, their clients, the agencies they work within, the knowledge they use, and the relationships they build as the foundation of their work. After hearing from the social service workers, I recognized how my approach to knowing did not honor the importance of relationship in our encounters. Their emphasis on truly being with their clients, in a genuine and meaningful way, made me stop and consider how I was coming into educational encounters.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what really stuck with me from the participants’ narratives was the importance of being present and “being with” others. As Hannah and Alison highlight in the discussion above, it is important that we truly see people and attend to them; for Alison, this was integral to treating clients with respect and dignity. The participants’ discussions of relational practice—bringing their genuine self into relationship with others and meeting people where they are at—awakened me to the fact that, although I discussed the importance of relational practice with students, my approach to research and my approach to teaching revealed that I was not practicing it. I focused my teaching on content acquisition (assessed through traditional measures) without considering the individual integration of the material. I expected students to enter the classroom motivated and engaged, academically and digitally literate; I wasn’t aware of the complex interaction of factors that could affect a student’s approach to learning. I didn’t attend to the relationality of myself and my students or the learning process. The participant narratives highlighted to me that the assumptions embedded in my transactional approach to teaching and learning, my approach as the expert, and my attempts to fill student deficits with knowledge and skills were antithetical to relational work. Instead, as I would do in social service work, I needed to come into encounters with others with humility, vulnerability, and an openness to what may emerge. This requires the strength to embrace unknowability and to enter relationships (with students and others) with a willingness to learn. I had to recognize the power involved in assuming an expert role and attempt to mediate that power by creating genuine relationships with my students. I had to go in as learner, working alongside my students, with creativity and curiosity. Most importantly, I had to recognize that my students were not all in the same place in terms of their own becoming—that I had to try to meet each one where they were at for learning to be meaningful.

As seen, my encounters with my participants and the narratives we co-constructed had

significant impacts on how I saw myself, my roles, and my way of approaching the world. I then reflected on how what I had learned from my participants altered my understanding of teaching and learning.

### **Reflecting: Rethinking Relational Processes of Teaching and Learning**

The ideas that resonated for me from the participants' narratives led me to reflect on teaching and learning as a relational process. To me, recognizing we (students and educators alike, as well as the arrangements we are constituted within) are in a process of ongoing transformation alters the way I approach my role in the classroom. In this process of becoming with my students, I try to embrace "not knowing" and the vulnerability involved in taking risks and come into teaching and learning encounters in a genuine way—to be with others, to truly see them and attend to them. I believe this creates the potential for the learning encounter to emerge in unexpected ways. This is relational pedagogy: Relational pedagogy recognizes that we exist in relationship. Relation, not the individual, is the basis of our existence.

Recognizing the importance of relation and our connections to one another, being ethical involves caring (Noddings, 2013). Ethics of care is rooted in feminist traditions, examining the role of biological sex in moral development and caregiving behaviors (Gilligan, 1982) and reconceptualising notions of the public and private spheres (Held, 2006). An ethics of care emphasizes caring encounters—interactions where we are open to sharing, understanding, and reflecting upon the experience of the other and putting our energy towards their needs (Noddings, 2013). Caring encounters involve connection and reciprocity; although each encounter may involve one "caring-for" and one "cared-for," the one caring-for derives recognition from the cared-for (Noddings, 2013). The one caring-for doesn't enter the encounter for their own benefit yet still derives something from the encounter. Both the cared-for and the caring-for leave the encounter different than they were before. As well, roles of caring and being cared for are fluid and relational; in some encounters we are the carer and others the one receiving care (Noddings, 2013). Caring in relationships is the foundation of teaching and learning.

Examining the ethics of care in an educational environment means creating open dialogue with students, communicating with an intent to understand, and building a connection that promotes reciprocal learning and growth. Drawing on Freire's emancipatory education, relational pedagogy involves *being with*, not *doing to* (Pearce & Down, 2011). This involves starting where the students are—meeting them where they are at—and building "relational trust" (Pearce & Down, 2011, p. 491). Caring relationships influence teaching, learning, engagement, and success. Students have positive relationships with educators who are approachable, who make time, and who are there for their students, in essence, those educators who make students feel cared for. Having positive relations with professors and staff in educational environments helps students feel like they belong (Pearce & Down, 2011), promoting engagement and student success.

As a teacher, I now go into each teaching/learning encounter cognizant that the classroom experience, and the enacted curriculum, emerges through interactions. Material agents—such as



our physical space, chairs, tables, and the smell of whiteboard markers—contribute to how the encounter emerges. I attend to our affective connection and the learning process as it emerges. I recognize the potential of our caring encounter and I explicitly challenge the idea (with my students) that I am in charge of what happens within the class. Rather than only working towards institutionally defined learning outcomes for each course, I try to find new, thoughtful ways to explore learning. For me, this exploration might involve being open to learning in the moment (both by me and by my students), examining learning that happened in the past and which can only be recognized retrospectively, and forecasting learning as it may happen in the future. I work within (and against) the structures and constraints of the institution to attend to the relational processes that are emerging.

From the beginning of our time together, I articulate to my students how I see my role as educator, my beliefs about teaching and learning, and my intended goals for our shared time. That is, in my initial class with students (and on the course syllabus), I share these foundational, yet often hidden, aspects of my approach to our time together. I explain to students that I enter my role as a learner, not expert, and I highlight the need for risk, vulnerability, and “not knowing” for all of us in the learning encounter. We discuss that openness, flexibility, and courage are necessary in breaking down our assumptions and expanding our perspectives. Embracing uncertainty allows me to truly be with my students—the essence of relational work. While I have a lesson plan for each class, I meet the students where they are at and allow the lesson to develop based on our interactions. I am intentional in being genuine and humble in entering the classroom as a learner; I recognize and articulate to the students how sharing their experiences, history, culture, beliefs, and values offers rich learning for us all. I seek to understand students’ perspectives and experiences and to create an affective connection that facilitates growth. I show my students care as they need to experience being cared for before they can care about others (Noddings, 2013).

Rather than encouraging students to be vulnerable and take risks that promote learning, I attempt to embody vulnerability and risk-taking as a learner. This could be as simple as recognizing when I don’t know the answer to a student’s question and suggesting we figure it out together as a class. Or it could involve critically examining some of the educational policies that shape our time together. While this does not alter power differentials in the classroom (which I believe are inherent, given the grading expectations and neoliberal adherence to competition in post-secondary institutions), it can provide an opportunity to talk about how power flows in the classroom and how people are differentially affected. Parallels can then be drawn with how power flows in social service work.

Building on our affective connection, I discuss my goals for our learning encounter. While I am constrained by content-related course objectives, I primarily emphasize developing creative and critical thinking rather than the memorization of course content or the accumulation of specific marketable skills. I want students to learn to evaluate information, problem-solve novel situations, and demonstrate creativity and imagination in innovating new approaches and interventions. I want students to be able to uncover why things are the way they are and offer new possibilities for the future. I can explore concepts and ideas, opening up new ways of thinking and new questions that can be asked rather than presenting content as fact. This may

involve critically deconstructing the social, historical, economic, and cultural contexts within which the information we are discussing has taken shape. For example, in various courses we may critically examine the diagnostic criteria for mental disorders or the patriarchal, Eurocentric underpinnings of developmental theories. We explore these concepts and ideas together so students can then apply these tools and theories intentionally in their practice, thoughtfully using them in helpful ways while being aware of their potential to reproduce inequity and injustice. Critically engaging with material leads me to attend to how learning is emerging throughout our encounter and to finding creative and varied ways for students to demonstrate their learning.

Awareness of continual transition and transformation leads me, in my work with students, to focus on the learning process. As a new educator, I focused primarily on content, delivering curriculum, and using various assessment techniques to determine student understanding of the required content. With greater reflection upon relational pedagogy, I now attend to the dynamic process of our learning encounter and try to see it from students' eyes. I use regular verbal and written check-ins, elicit formative and summative feedback individually and in groups, and ask students to share their experiences of their learning in various ways. These techniques vary in the time and energy required and the depth of information they elicit. Very brief check-ins with students can offer a climate check on what is happening in the classroom. For example, at the end of class, I may ask students to write one word to represent their experience for that class. This provides me with valuable information on how the students are experiencing the environment, learning process, and content, and it allows me to address obstacles as they arise. For more in-depth information, I ask students for written anonymous feedback on instructional approaches and coursework, as well as meet with students individually to invite them to share their experiences. Engaging with students throughout the learning process allows for the sharing of experiences that promote positive relationships. In addition, I can gather meaningful and helpful feedback to shape my approach to the course. This information helps me recognize the complexity of the students in their varied relationships and how they experience them, especially within the classroom, which influences their becoming; in short, I can better meet them where they are.

With my focus on emergent learning processes and meeting students where they are, I have changed my approach to assessment. When I approached my class as "expert," I regularly used quizzes, tests, and term papers as means to assess how the students had understood, synthesized, and connected the curriculum. Now, I find myself seeking out creative and varied ways for the students to demonstrate their learning. I recognize that the skills traditionally required to demonstrate learning (i.e., academic literacy and now, during the global pandemic, digital literacy) through quizzes and papers are not similarly developed in all of my students. While my students may have achieved significant learning, they may not be able to express this learning as well as other students through traditional means of assessment. I have experimented with allowing students to choose how to demonstrate their learning and have been inspired by their creativity and hard work—I have received excellent podcasts, multimedia art pieces, and presentations. I have received a screenplay, in which one of the scholars we studied became a major character. Another student choreographed and presented a dance piece demonstrating her changing understanding of the research process. The demonstration of learning through these non-traditional means is amazing and rewarding to witness.

## **Reflecting: Lessons Learned, Risks, and Challenges**

I reflected on my learning from my research with social service workers to develop meaningful teaching and learning practices, including building affective, caring connections with students; attending to the emergent learning process; and seeking out creative means of assessment. For me, these elements are intertwined and co-constitute one another. By attending to the learning process, I am also able to build better relationships with students; these relationships enable students to take risks and engage in creative forms of assessment. Being creative with assessment promotes the development of learning encounters in unforeseen ways. Together, these integral elements allow the learning encounter to take on a life of its own. Not knowing how things will develop may make educators nervous and allowing encounters to emerge is not without risk. Educators may be concerned that the encounter will go off topic or, worse, move into sensitive areas that may be harmful for some students. We need to be aware and prepared for our learning to move in unexpected directions and to be okay with reining things in to get back on track. I argue that we also need to recognize that avoiding sensitive areas is unhelpful for learning and, while risky, exploring sensitive topics in a way that recognizes the need for safety allows students to critically examine their own assumptions and promotes greater understanding and empathy. In my experience, sometimes differences of opinion, insensitivities, and miscommunication can rupture relationships in the classroom. This is an opportunity to work collaboratively with students to model the importance of repair and to connect this process of rupture and repair to their relationships as social service workers.

As educators, we have likely experienced learning encounters. However, we cannot predict when together we will share, discuss, or debate ideas in a way that makes us, as co-learners in the classroom, recognize our assumptions, wrestle with new ideas, and think differently than we had before. We cannot predict when new connections are made, illuminating new understandings of how things are and how they could be. For me, I often recognize after class that things went in an unexpected and highly generative direction and I find myself trying to replay what catalyzed the encounter. These encounters emerge out of the dynamic arrangements of the classroom—human and material—and while they cannot be forced or predicted, we, as becoming-educators, can work from an ethics of care, attend to the class, and be open to what may emerge.

## **Generating: What May Be Possible in Educational Encounters?**

I recognize that in my becoming from social service work to post-secondary educator to doctoral student and onward, my work was grounded in a desire to make things better. As stated, I wanted to better prepare students to practice as social service workers so they would be more effective in supporting positive change in their clients, their communities, and the wider world. Through my engagement with my participants, and finding parallels in their narratives and mine, I recognized that making things better does not mean transmitting practice competencies to social service workers as they move through the assembly line of their educational trajectory. Making things better means, through relationship, providing space for students to critically examine themselves, their knowledge, and their approach to working with others. Relational pedagogy allows students to experience what it means to be cared for and to care for others.

Relational pedagogy and working from an ethics of care is more important than ever, as we face a global pandemic that is disproportionately killing vulnerable people (the elderly, the poor, people of color who have been denied the basic social determinants of health). In addition to anxiety regarding the virus itself, the impacts of the virus—mental health concerns, unemployment, homelessness, increasing divisiveness over how to respond to the pandemic—include isolation and hopelessness. We are increasingly disconnected and devalued. Like many others, I have started to explore and experiment with relational pedagogy in virtual spaces. How can we, as educators and as social service workers, engage the virtual spaces between us to do meaningful work?

Further work is necessary in the investigation of transition from school to work as a process of becoming. A new conceptualization of transition promotes different questions and approaches in research on students, educators, and institutions and how transition experiences fit within broader frameworks of education, work, and what it means to live a good life. It would be generative to explore students' experiences of school/work as connected and ongoing aspects of their lives. What motivations and intentions shape these school/work experiences? What alternate discourses—transgressing dominant discourses—do students draw on to make sense of their school/work experience? Research could also examine educators and how, in their institutionalized role, they may unwittingly reproduce neoliberal discourses and promote deficit-focused concepts of students that reproduce inequality. How are educators constituted and constrained within their role and what tensions do they experience working within their post-secondary institution? How are neoliberal discourses filtered down through institutions and how do educators experience these discourses? How are educators disrupting expectations of competition and traditional notions of “success”? How might educators critically examine the complexity of relationships between school and work with students? How might educators explore ideas of meaningful or democratized work? How are educators' implicit conceptualizations of “success” shaping their teaching/learning approaches? Are there tensions between student and educator ideals of success?

While it may be unrealistic to think teaching and learning could be completely transformed by building affective connections with students and attending to the emergent learning process, there may be hegemonic practices that can be altered or disrupted. Hegemonic practices—those dominant ways of thinking, being, and doing in the classroom that largely go unexamined—include viewing teachers as experts who transmit knowledge to be internalized by students, who are then assessed, graded, and ranked. Other dominant views include assuming students should be adequately prepared (as readers, writers, digital learners, etc.) and that lack of ability equates to laziness or lack of motivation. Another hegemonic practice is following a structured or pre-designed course framework (without allowing influence from the students involved) or believing that learning outcomes can be set before a course begins. While being aware of and attending to my approach to teaching and learning will not transform education and facilitate significant social change, I believe it can disrupt dominant practices and the status quo; questioning values, discourses, beliefs, and practices which are taken for granted provides a spark of potential. Although this rupture may quickly be subsumed within the way things have always been, these moments produce the possibility for change. Strom and Martin (2013) describe the power of disrupting dominant thought in their project, where they engage with their

own reproduction of neoliberal ideology in the classroom. They explain that “in that moment of escape, that line of flight, the world changes infinitesimally—in some small way, from that ‘deviant’ interaction/moment, our brains have changed, we have changed” (Strom & Martin, 2013, p. 229). That is, when we experience a learning encounter that disrupts hegemonic ideals of teaching and learning and allows us to escape from dominant practices, we are changed. We leave that encounter different than we were before. As these disruptions and escapes will always be subsumed within the status quo, Strom and Martin (2013) recommend actively seeking daily disruptions in dominant thinking, being, and doing. It is through the repeated escape that infinitesimal changes to ourselves, our students, and the world create the momentum for significant social change. Barad (2007) argues that “the world and its possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting” (p. x). As teacher, educators, and students, we have an important role in contributing to the remaking of the world, within our classrooms, in each moment.

If the “possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting,” there is great opportunity in educational encounters (Barad, 2007, p. x). These encounters can change us, our students, our institutions, and the world more broadly. It is through our connections and the space between us that the potential for change exists. As always becoming-educators, we can attend to these connections and the potentiality for change in hopes of facilitating encounters that disrupt hegemonic practices. These ongoing disruptions change us and allow us to enter future encounters differently. Through reflections on the experiences of new social service workers, I was inspired to re-examine my own relational approach to teaching and learning. I take this learning forward to seek connections and disruptions, and to remake the world, in every encounter (Barad, 2007).

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***About the Author:*** Meaghan Dougherty, EdD., is Faculty, Department of Child and Youth Care, Douglas College, Coquitlam, British Columbia, Canada ([doughertym@douglascollege.ca](mailto:doughertym@douglascollege.ca)).