REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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Teaching and Learning

Arlene F. Reilly-Sandoval and Carol L. Langer
Editors

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Reflections from the Teaching and Learning Section Editors

Arlene F. Reilly-Sandoval and Carol L. Langer

Abstract: This serves as the introduction to the Special Issue on Teaching and Learning of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping.

Keywords: teaching, learning, narratives, experiential learning, holistic learning, transferable skills, field supervision

As the co-editors for the Teaching and Learning section, we were excited to be asked to write our first introduction for a Reflections issue. As we discussed the articles in this issue, we realized that we had our own stories to tell that reflect the content of the narratives included here. So, we decided to introduce ourselves to you, the reader, and share our short reflection about our journey into social work education and the synergy of teaching and learning.

Carol: I was never one of those children who lined up dolls and teddy bears to play school. I preferred to draw. My Big Chief tablet was always with me and acted as my sketch pad. I will admit to being a bit of a daydreamer. Marie Curie was an influence on me, and I decided during high school, after taking a career inventory, that I would be a doctor. My family was poor. I did not realize it at the time. When I investigated college, my heart stopped. How could I possibly afford to attend? A family friend gave me $500 to attend, and by default, I chose the closest college – a "teacher's college." My general education coursework was chosen with the idea that I would escape and go to medical school. My parents and peers discouraged that; they convinced me that I should be a nurse because female doctors would never get a job. My parents went a step further and suggested that I should just stay in the college I was attending because if I became a teacher, I would have summers and holidays to be with my future children. Without family support of any kind, and trying to pay my way by myself, I decided that perhaps they were correct. I did enjoy the coursework I was taking. So, I declared education with concentrations in English and physical education as my major. I had no clue how much I would love teaching. During my "student teaching" experience, my supervising teacher allowed me to experiment using my ideas for teaching. I preferred experiential education, and quite honestly, I had no coursework in the area. I just knew that students needed more than a text in order to be drawn into the material and help it to "stick." Teaching was in my blood to stay. While I was teaching, though, I was bringing extra oranges and PBJ sandwiches for those kids who hadn't eaten. I began coat drives for those students K-12 who had insufficient winter attire. I started a food pantry for emergency needs. I was doing social work. After my husband died, leaving me with three young children, I realized I needed to do something to raise my income and increase our economic security. I asked about careers in demand, and social work was at the top of the list.

Remember that career inventory I took? The top career in my results was social work. I earned my MSW and practiced school social work, among other things. Once more, I realized that the process of teaching and learning, including the value of experiential, holistic learning, was in my wheelhouse. So, after a number of years or practice, I was approached about teaching a single class at a local college. That single assignment turned into three courses the next semester and a full time job the next academic year. The rest is history, as they say. I am a social worker who teaches. I am a teacher who does social work. The boundaries between the roles are quite clear for me, but the transferable skills and knowledge continue to amaze me, and I have been doing this for more than 30 years. The discoveries that the authors in this special section share with us readers are profound, salient, and lasting. Thank you, authors, for recognizing and sharing the insights you have gained on your own journey to becoming who you are.

Arlene: My introduction to social work was different than most other social workers. My story must be disappointing to students, but it is my story. I was a newly single parent, returning to school for my Bachelor's degree in Sociology. As a single parent, I had very little income and therefore qualified for a bit of financial aid. One financial aid program I qualified for was work-study. At that university, there were a

variety of work-study positions that could be attained, either on-campus or off-campus. I was a bit late in being awarded a work-study grant, so by the time I went to the financial aid office to see about a position, the only options were off-campus. I selected two community agencies who were looking for work-study. The first was a numismatic museum. This meant I would be working with coins, paper money, and medals. I always enjoyed learning about coins, so I thought this would be a good fit. The other position was at a local youth shelter. I thought it would be a good idea to try to make a difference in the lives of youth. After all, "they are our future," I thought. My problem at this stage in my life was that I wasn't sure what I wanted to do as a career, I just knew I had to have one. I put in applications to both agencies, and the youth agency called me almost immediately to set up an interview. I was hired after the interview, and this became my introduction to the world of social work.

While I did not have a burning passion to work with people when I started working at the youth shelter, I developed this passion. My discovery of the youth's home experiences was a culture shock for me. I had lived a pretty sheltered life and had no idea people were not loving and kind to their children. This ignited a passion in me to be a person that could offer this unconditional positive regard to youth and help them transition to their next stage in life. I was a very strong youth advocate. Upon my graduation, I was hired full-time at the agency.

Over time, I moved into a foster care position with the agency. This is when I discovered that parents and foster parents also needed this unconditional positive regard and advocacy. I learned I must be a family advocate, and that everyone had a story to tell. By that time, I discovered that there was an actual degree called Social Work, and that it was possible for me to get a Master's degree. My enrollment into the MSW program opened my eyes to the intersectionality of diversity, and the person-in-environment concept. I hadn't been taught this in my undergraduate studies. I had to work twice as hard as the BSW students in my program, as they already knew concepts and it was assumed I did, too. I spent a lot of time looking up information and learning about the planned change process, treatment planning, systems theory, and other concepts unique to social work. With each new discovery I found myself more fascinated and passionate about social work as a career.

One of my passions in the field was cultural diversity. As a person of color, a woman, a single parent, and a person with a disability, I realized that society was not set up in a way that was affirming to people like me or my clients. As a result, I jumped at the opportunity to become a diversity instructor and trainer.

After I received my MSW, I had an opportunity to become a field supervisor for BSW level students. I approached this job with the same passion as I had with clients. I decided students would only engage in filing if it was an actual learning process, and did everything I could to protect the learning environment for the students. My experience in the MSW program made me sensitive to the learning needs of students. At the same time, as a supervisor, I was learning that I was not responsible for solving the problems my supervisees brought to me, and sometimes all they really wanted to do was vent about an issue. I realized supervision had similarities to client work in that I should allow the worker self-determination within agency policy. Due to my work as a field supervisor, I began to be invited to speak to students in the classroom, and discovered I really enjoyed teaching. This led to adjunct teaching in the BSW program. I had worked as a trainer in different capacities, but teaching was much different. Training was time-limited and usually covered a single topic in detail, while teaching was broader but the timeframe allowed detailed learning about several specific skills or concepts. Teaching also allowed me to get to know "participants" (students) better, and to develop a learning relationship with them. Teaching also re-invigorated me and improved my supervision and intervention skills by reminding me about social work skills and concepts.

Eventually, I was able to obtain a full-time teaching position. It was here that I discovered a whole different problem: staying up-to-date on innovations in the field! I resolved to always have a hand in field work, either through contract work or volunteering. In this way, my activities outside of the classroom could inform my teaching, and my teaching could inform the way I approached practice. This synergy of teaching and practice has allowed me to continue to make a difference in my community, while educating others to make a difference, as well.

My initial "falling into" social work opened up a whole new world for me, one that helped me make a difference in my community, that helped me be a better parent, and taught me to navigate systems in order to advocate for others. It helped me understand the experiences of other people and the roadblocks they encounter in order to self-actualize, and that sometimes people don't treat each other very well. The people who don't treat others well are very often the product of their own experiences and environment, and in a way this reaffirmed my belief that people would be "good" each other if they could be. Far from discouraging me, this information brought me full-circle to my initial beliefs that humans are complicated, but generally want to do "good" in the world.

When we shared our personal journey into teaching social work, we discovered that there is a convergence in our stories that reflects what the authors in this section have revealed. We see the connection between our choice of career and the disciplines within which we were educated. That connection is the observation that we each had experiences that led us to the discovery of social work as a profession, and further, to teaching as an expression of our passions. We both value not just education but the immersion of ourselves in the process of continued growth, sharing journeys with our students.

The topic of self-discovery is a focus for Trevor Gates in his article, "Coming of Age as an LGBTQ Social Work Educator: Reflections on a Personal and Professional Journey." Trevor Gates explores the issue of personal and professional identity, as well as the developmental process over time. He describes his personal identity as a gay man, its relationship to teaching diversity, and the 40 challenges of responding to student's personal values around the issue of sexual orientation identity. The issue is complicated by the fact that most social work students made the decision to enter social work based on their personal values (Hughes, 2011; Osteen, 2011) yet those same values may result in difficulty engaging in affirmative practice with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, polygamous/polyamorous, and kink (LGBTQIAPK) populations. Trevor describes his experience with a student who had difficulty with affirmative practice, reflects on his knowledge then, compares it to his current professional development, and considers how he might handle the same situation now. Embedded in this narrative is the consideration of context of practice and the manifestation of the social work educator's personal and professional development with the classroom environment and the students' own personal and professional development.

Social workers are not immune to the challenges of everyday life. While social work educators are often viewed by students as having all the answers and experience, we are nonetheless still human. In "Grief and Loss: Reflections Along the Journey to Healing," Kenya Yonawa McKinley describes her experience with the loss of her sister, and her challenge to remain professional, yet human, to her students. McKinley's discussion of the stages of grief and her experiences as she moved through them reminds us to be cognizant of each other's experiences and that grief can be an opportunity for growth and learning.

This trend of metamorphosis and context of practice is continued in Stephanie Lyu Rhee's article, "A Caterpillar Morphs into a Butterfly." Rhee describes teaching as helping students cast off their cocoons, to morph into the butterfly as social workers. Her experience in her first semester of teaching led to the realization that social work educators are often in their own cocoons, and that paying attention to the context of the classroom can help educators morph into their own butterflies with respect to educating undergraduate social workers.

A title such as, "Sticky Bombs!" is certainly intriguing, to say the least. What on earth could this narrative contain? Author Casey O'Meara deftly weaves the story of a father-daughter walk that engages the whole person and develops a strong case for the value of experiential education. His daughter gives him a lesson about remembering how to learn while also surprising him with new awareness of her own classroom experience. Ultimately, O'Meara explains that learning occurs naturally and is purposeful. Our goal as educators is to find those moments where both of these criteria can be manifested for the students in our classes. A father-daughter walk ignites a passion for extending learning beyond the classroom in productive and insightful ways. As for what "sticky bombs" are, you will have to read the article to find the answer.

To be in a classroom and get to know our students is a goal for most, if not all, of us who are teachers. Giving and receiving assignments is part of the plan. Thinking that she knew a student, author Amy Fisher had an experience that provided her with the type of information that deepened her knowledge of one particular student, as well as helped her to realize she is both modeling social work behavior and educator behavior for her students. Providing feedback on two occasions to a student who seemed to be very well prepared and who interacted in significant ways in discussions, Amy was disturbed so see that her comments for changes on a paper in order to improve the next grade were not being heeded. She learned in conversation with the student, the paper was being written on a cell phone because the student was a single parent who worked full time and took advantage of every opportunity to complete homework when she could. The one piece of technology that she had with her was her cell phone. Turning into problem-solver, Amy helped the student find an alternative to this method. Her narrative, "Teaching as Practice: A Mobile Phone Points the Way," details how the author recognized she used multiple social work skills while teaching. She was able to see how important it was to students to see her both as a role model for a professional social worker and for a successful educator.

In a very visual narrative, visiting a floating city in Cambodia brought the struggles in poverty of its residents and the incredible positivity and strength they embodied to life. In their article, "Contextualizing Practice in Cambodia: A Hidden Living Place with Practice Insight," Monit Cheung and Michelle Srader demonstrate clearly the need to put aside middle class lenses and view the environment and people from a strengths perspective. Amidst the unique sounds, sights, smells, and tastes of the floating city's boats are people with a sense of pride and a culture they cherish. Instead of allowing themselves to be disadvantaged because of the enormous poverty in which they live, residents of this floating city have used the power of their culture to sustain them. In this fish-rich area which could easily be known only for fishing, floating boats sell food and beverages, as well as other goods and services. An entire web of commerce has been developed, and in the truest meaning of interdependence, each boat is dependent on other boats for its survival and growth. Cheung and Srader carefully narrate the importance of context in understanding the intricacies of this city. Recommending immersion experiences as important to attaining cultural competence, the authors communicate clearly the idea that just a tour through this city would not be enough. One must experience it in order to understand it. This acts a reminder that we must strive to put the person in the environment in which they live, being mindful of the strengths and challenges therein.

The process of teaching and learning is a two-way street. We learn from our students as they learn from us. In order to maximize this opportunity, we look for holistic ways to engage, inform, and nurture them and us.

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Coming of Age as an LGBTQ Social Work Educator: Reflections on a Personal and Professional Journey

Trevor G. Gates

Abstract: Personal and professional identities intersect in the social work classroom, particularly for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). In this narrative, I reflect on the intersection of personal and professional identities in my own experience as a social work educator, recalling an experience in the classroom where conflict arose about LGBTQ issues. Additionally, implications for using the social work classroom to explore challenging issues are explored.

Keywords: LGBTQ issues; diversity; social work education

As a social work educator who has taught diverse students from unique backgrounds, I have struggled with balancing the need to deliver useful content in a way that is authentic to whom I am. I am a gay social work educator interested in engaging students in affirmative practice with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people and communities. I have come of age both as a person and as a social work educator during a time of incredible progress for LGBTQ individuals and communities. When I was coming of age in the 1990s, people from the LGBTQ communities were becoming more visible. Sitcom comedian Ellen Degeneres came out both on-screen in her popular television show *Ellen* as well as coming out publicly in her personal life (Hubert, 1999). President Bill Clinton vocally signaled his support for LGBTQ communities and subsequently courted LGBTQ voters in his run for the White House (Mertus, 2007). Yet, religion had incredible influence over the discourse on LGBTQ rights in the U.S (Fetner, 2000). Don't Ask Don't Tell was implemented in the armed forces, effectively banning LGBTQ people from openly serving in the military (Burks, 2011). Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Laramie, Wyoming, was the victim of a violent hate crime (Boulden, 2001). Televangelist Reverend Jerry Falwell takes a stab at children's television character Tinky Winky, a purple stuffed teletubby that Falwell accused of promoting LGBTQ lifestyles (Hendershot, 2000). At the time, I was coming out to my deeply religious Southern Baptist family and community. All these experiences have profoundly shaped my identity as a gay person and social work educator. This narrative describes how my personal and professional life intersects when it comes to teaching about LGBTQ issues, including a reflection of the challenges of being an authentic person in the classroom.

Fully realizing and embracing all our identities does not come quickly in life, but rather over many years. I am reminded of a particularly poignant example of how my identities intersect in the classroom by an experience I had in the classroom in Chicago when I was in my 20s. I was a lecturer for a generalist social work class at an urban community college. In the class, I taught students about strategies for engagement, assessment, and identifying concerns that brought the client to the attention of the social worker (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997). However, teaching and learning always occurs within a social context (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Part of the social context was me. Like any other human encounter, I bring myself to the classroom–all my brokenness, successfulness, happiness, sadness, and wrinkledness that make up my life as a human being. Part of my experience is my own development. While I was teaching the course, I was going through my own developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. Arnett (2000) notes that work, relationships, and worldviews are the primary identity tasks of emerging adulthood, and these tasks were central to my life. In the classroom, I was still figuring out my place as a social work educator. I was learning out how to manage the challenges of teaching students who were sometimes twice my age and who often eagerly bring with them to the classroom a wealth of knowledge to share (Anastas, 2010).

Classroom encounters were exciting but at times also intimidating. While social work was my first and only professional role after University, I lacked some of the life experience that comes with living 40, 50, or more years. I did not always know the answers to all my students' questions. Surely, I knew the textbook

answers about how to engage in generalist social work practice. However, my real world experience was limited. I did not know all life's answers. Likely did none of them–maybe a few thought that they might have all the answers, but usually were searching just like the rest of us. Yet, some of the students knew a great deal. Some of my students had experienced the "hard knocks" of life. They lived lives that I could only imagine. For example, I did not know what it was like to be a single parent working three jobs in Chicago to make ends meet. I had no real experience living in poverty. As a college student from a middle-class family who could not contribute much to my daily living expenses, I knew what it was like to work with a barebones budget. I knew what it was like to make do on ramen noodles. Yet, I had the privilege of attending college and the advantage of family who could occasionally provide a few dollars to help me get by. Some of my students' families would have liked to be able to help out this way but could barely feed themselves or the other children in the home. I did my best to understand this reality although I would never know their experiences. I knew my subject, but they had the most expertise on their own lives. They knew their lives and how their lives had shaped their identities. I told them that I hoped we could learn a lot from one another.

And learn a lot we did. I learned from many of my students about the complicated nature of having multiple identities. For instance, I am reminded of Eduwa, a Nigerian woman in her mid-50s who came to class neatly dressed in colorful traditional dress, who taught me a great deal about carefully approaching sensitive subjects in class. (Key details in this narrative have been altered to protect privacy.) She spoke in a strong accent and stood out from the class of mostly African American students in their 20s. "Ms. Eduwa," as most of her fellow students called her, came to each class with her assigned textbooks, sticky-notes coming from them, and a well-worn notebook, in which she actively recorded her notes. Eduwa had a strong presence in class, and I often felt intimidated by her. Like many adult students, Eduwa came to higher education because she saw education as a way to find her place in the middle-class (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Eduwa hoped to use her education for a promotion to a management position at her social service agency. She firmly believed that an education would help make her life better for herself and her children. Each learning activity in the class was viewed by Eduwa as either potentially relevant to her work or not. She was interested in learning what she needed to learn to be successful in the class, yet she was equally interested in why she needed to know it (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Eduwa was particularly engaged in the classroom when she considered the material to be relevant to her life and to her work. She was employed full-time as a case manager at a local social service agency providing outreach to people who were recent immigrants to the United States. In class, Eduwa had little time to socialize with the other students. She typically sat in the middle of the first row of class. She clearly wanted to communicate to others that she was serious about her learning.

Eduwa arrived to class late one week and sat conspicuously on the back row of class with her arms crossed. In the previous session, the class and I discussed the importance of respecting diversity of race/ethnicity, national origin, gender and gender identity, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). The students engaged in active discussion around several case studies, one of which was an African American man who identified as bisexual, had different physical abilities, and was of a lower socioeconomic status. He walked with a cane for many years, but needed the help of a social worker in arranging new options for mobility. He had specific service needs in mind, but wanted a social worker who would respect *all* of whom he was as a person. At the time, Chicago had a visible LGBTQ disability community. Maybe, one student said, the client could be connected with the local LGBTQ community, if he was not already connected. Another student noted that the social worker might also benefit from connecting with this community, to get further consultation about how to best proceed with this client. In all, the class came up with what I thought were many creative ideas for engaging the client. Though some of the students talked about managing their beliefs around spirituality and sexual orientation, the tone of the class was respectful and productive. One student came out to the class as bisexual herself. I briefly talked about my own experiences in coming out. There were other LGBTQ students in the class and several others had come out to me privately after class. I am always encouraged when students feel safe enough to come out to me and

to their classmates. I believe that this type of openness and authenticity serves as a good model for future work with clients. In all, I felt like the experience had gone well, and I learned a lot from the discussion. I suspected by Eduwa's body language, however, that she had a different perspective on the discussion.

As is my routine, I began class with a review of our previous topic on diversity and set the stage for class activities for the day. This day, I talked about how excited I was by the active discussion on sexual orientation identity and other human diversity during the prior week. I shared that I learned a great deal from the class about how many people navigate multiple social and cultural identities in life. In the past, I have found that the strategy of review and repetition helps students solidify lessons learned in the previous session (Cowan, 2014; Foley & Kaiser, 2013). It is also an opportunity to seek clarification or to resolve uncertainties. I have learned in social work education that review and repetition helps me identify gaps in meeting learning objectives. For example, if many of my students are not retaining information within a reasonable degree of accuracy from week-to-week, review and repetition helps clue me into this. We might need to spend more time if there are huge gaps in learning. I thought this pre-class review, while productive, was fairly ordinary. It was no different from the other review sessions. I thought the day would be like any other.

I discovered that I was wrong. As Eduwa arrived, one student mentioned an LGBTQ advocacy event in Chicago and agreed to share the details of the event with interested students via email. I commented that it sounded like an interesting event and asked that the student include me on the email. The conversation continued and I casually mentioned that the visibility and support available to LGBTQ communities was a strength of the city. While there is surely work to be done in Chicago with LGBTQ communities, particularly around social justice issues like racism and class disparities, Chicago is largely a friendly place with a thriving LGBTQ community. Among other reasons, people come to Chicago so that they can be a part of a larger LGBTQ community. As I made these statements, I noticed tension in the back of the classroom. Reluctantly, Eduwa raised her hand. When called upon, Eduwa said, "Professor, I do not appreciate you discussing homosexuality in class. It is against God's law." I responded that I appreciate that there may be some differences of opinion when we discuss diversity, but that social workers should strive to show respect despite the type of diversity. Eduwa then rose to her feet and shouted, "You are promoting homosexuality at a Black college!"

Another student, Ariana, stood and shouted, "Sit down!" Ariana was a charismatic African American woman in her early 20s who typically came to class in a Chicago Bulls basketball jersey, shorts, and a backwards baseball cap. Ariana was a student keenly interested in LGBTQ advocacy. Several weeks prior, Ariana had come out to me as a lesbian and introduced her girlfriend to me at a local event. Eduwa continued to shout, but Ariana stood her ground. She said, firmly, "You need to leave." Cheeks flushed and needing a moment to regroup, I suggested that we take a five-minute break. I was really in no position to continue without a few minutes to collect my thoughts. I also hoped to meet Eduwa outside during the break, to arrange a time to meet to further discuss her concerns. Perhaps we could talk about what happened in the classroom. If I am honest with myself and my readers, part of me wanted to reason with Eduwa.

Dealing with attitudes around sexual orientation identity was familiar territory to me. First coming out during my adolescent years, a time where social relationships and friendships are quite important to young people, I was no stranger to dealing with homophobic attitudes and beliefs from some of my peers (Crisp & McCave, 2007). High school was an uncomfortable place, at times wrought with coping with homophobic slurs and bullying from my peers. While I always had a love for learning, I had been quickly pegged in high school by some of my peers as gay. Surely, I thought that I probably was, yet I wanted to keep that part of myself under the radar, given my conservative family. Keeping that part of myself under the radar, however, was challenging when dealing with the taunts and sneers of my classmates. They thought they had me figured out. I did not engage in some of the activities that other boys enjoyed. I was not interested in sports, did not date, and had no interest in the cheerleaders. Surely, some gay youths are very engaged in high school sports, but I was not. Nearly as soon as I began high school, I anticipated moving on with my life. Though I found

solace in a few of my teachers–teachers that I now believe were probably LGBTQ themselves–I wanted to be finished with high school quickly. I dreamt of a college experience that would allow me to freely be myself. This would not come until many years later; yet, it was what I dreamed about at the time.

School experiences were complicated by my home experiences. My religious background taught me that same-sex attraction was wrong, and I had, by late adolescence, already struggled with managing family relationships around my sexual orientation identity. Adolescence was a tumultuous time for me, and high school was not a friendly place for a gay kid. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA), which are now becoming more common in high schools, had yet to emerge in my own high school when I had graduated. Even had there been a GSA, I might have been too fearful of attending–too afraid of what my peers thought, too afraid of what my parents would say, and too afraid of what might happen to me if I acknowledged who I was. While bullying of LGBTQ students is more on the radar of educators today, then it was not unusual to hear anti-gay epithets at school. I had been called a "fag" more times than I could remember. In high school, I was deeply upset by homophobia. By my 20s, however, I had learned to internalize this sort of homophobia a lot less. Though homophobia still stung, I had learned to be less emotionally affected. In some ways, responding to homophobia was what interested me in social work education and advocacy. It was both a personal and professional journey.

During break, I learned that Eduwa had left campus for the evening. Outside the classroom, I met another student from the class. Keon, an African American young man in his early 20s, was visibly upset. He tearfully shared with me about how disturbed he was by Eduwa's statements in class. Keon had recently come out to his mother, who he said had a similar reaction as Eduwa. Because of the conflict with his mother, Keon had moved out of his mother's house and had been sleeping on friends' sofas for the last several weeks. I hugged Keon, told him that he was brave for coming out, and assured him that his family would come around. My family, which once had very negative attitudes about LGBTQ people, had become supportive over the years, I said. There still might be hope for his family. Obviously, I could not give Keon any such guarantee about his family. Yet, the statement felt right at the time. Maybe I wanted to reassure him that life would get better. Life does not always get better or at least not in the way that we plan. I wish, in retrospect, that I had told him that things with his family might not get better, but that he would become stronger over time. He would overcome this. He would develop the support that he needed to feel safe in the world.

After the class resumed, we continued discussing diversity, particularly that it was not an easy topic. Race/ethnicity, national origin, gender, and gender identity, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, and other diversity factors are challenging to discuss. At times, discussing diversity issues can evoke strong emotions. The conversation can be deeply personal, especially for students who have experienced some form of social marginalization. I always hope that my students feel comfortable talking openly about their uncertainties around diversity. Surely, this discussion needs to occur in a respectful way. It has been my experience that, in the right space, students are comfortable exploring their uncertainties. I believe it is possible to talk both about firmly held beliefs and to explore new possibilities under the right conditions. After Eduwa's outburst, several students talked at length about how our discussion affected them. Eduwa's outburst in class, as well as Ariana's response, had become a teaching moment about how social workers can engage others in important dialogue around diversity, power, and privilege.

Eduwa never returned to the class or, to my knowledge, to the college. She never answered my e-mails or calls inviting her to an individual meeting to talk about what happened in class. She might have not felt comfortable facing her classmates or me ever again. Maybe she thought I would not try to understand her position. Though I have clear thoughts about how social workers should treat LGBTQ people as human beings with all the rights and responsibilities of the rest of society, fueled both by my experience as an LGBTQ person and as a social worker who served LGBTQ clients, I hoped that I would have been able to listen to Eduwa, to hear her unique story. Yet, there could have been other reasons why she did not return. Perhaps, despite her years of experience, Eduwa was not fully able to examine her feelings around diversity and sexual orientation identity. She also might have just been unwilling to do so. She could have decided

that the social work value of showing respect for a person's sexual orientation identity was a step too far. Conceivably, Eduwa might have decided that LGBTQ identity was too opposite her values, religion, or belief system. She might have found a vocation that was more aligned with her religious beliefs. I also sometimes wonder whether she met her goal of making life better for her and her children. I hope she did.

Eduwa may have also made the decision to continue working as a case manager at her social service agency without further exploring her attitudes about diversity and sexual orientation identity. Maybe she decided her dream of becoming a social work manager was not so important. Despite where Eduwa ended up, I regret that I could not more fully engage her. After witnessing in my own life about how attitudes can change around sexual orientation identity when a person has a personal relationship with an LGBTQ person, I cannot help think that progress could have been made with Eduwa. Perhaps there was something more that I could have done for Eduwa. I could have provided her some further support to explore her uncertainties about LGBTQ, ideally in a 1:1 setting where she did not have the added pressure of having an audience. I might have been also able to connect her with others from Nigerian or other religious communities who were active in LGBTQ advocacy. Even the college counseling center might have helped for engaging her in these issues. Of course, Eduwa may have declined any or all these interventions. She might have been perfectly fine with her current beliefs. Yet, regardless the result, I would have liked to get to know Eduwa better and to help her feel safe enough to explore her attitudes and beliefs in our class.

Since my experience with Eduwa, I have learned more about myself as a social work educator. Now in the latter half of my 30s, I have grown as an individual. Like many of my other contemporaries in my 30s, I have worked towards a stable relationship, job, and finances (Hutchison, 2012). I have worked to build a life that is more secure and satisfying. Life has become more established and routine. I now have a decade more of responding to homophobia and other sexual orientation issues. One gets very good at developing a tolerance for and an ability to respond to people who try to place us at the margins. Life also gives us other experiences. For example, since the incident, I had an experience dealing with job discrimination at a social service agency because of my sexual orientation identity. That experience taught me a great deal about the importance of standing up for myself, which has, in turn, taught me a great deal about how to teach my students how to stand up for others that are at the margins of society.

Fortunately, significant progress has also been made in LGBTQ social justice. A great deal has changed in U.S. society around certain civil rights, such as the freedom to marry. To be sure, not everyone is protected. The Trump administration has made attempts to roll back protections for LGBTQ people. More progress is still needed on the horizon around other civil rights issues, like the freedom from discrimination in employment and housing. Violence against people because of their gender identity and expression is still a significant social welfare problem (Flores, 2015). Yet, each of these changes in society has given me moment to reflect on the importance of social justice issues for LGBTQ communities. Each of these issues continues to give me fodder for discussion in my classes, particularly as I engage students in conversations about important social justice issues of today.

Today, I am continuing to engage my students in discussion around issues of race/ethnicity, national origin, gender and gender identity, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, and other forms of diverse identities. Students in my classes continue to explore their deeply held beliefs around sexual orientation, albeit the landscape in talking about LGBTQ issues has changed greatly. While I certainly remember Eduwa when I engage in these conversations, I no longer hesitate to talk about my own experiences when the topic of sexual orientation diversity comes up in class. It feels far less controversial than it once did. Possibly this is a result of my own advancement further into adulthood. I am more certain of myself and, with a decade more of experience talking about diversity, with any luck more equipped to handle these conversations. In these conversations, I am also reminded of students like Ariana and Keon who need an authentic and open teacher who is willing to take the time to help them feel safe in the classroom.

Interest in talking about sexual orientation identity issues has also seemed to increase. In the last several

decades, most mainstream professional organizations in the helping professions have, not only denounced conversion "ex-gay" therapy or other sexual orientation efforts, but have also acknowledged that sexual orientation identity is part of the normal spectrum of human experience and promote affirmative practice with sexual minorities (American Counseling Association, 2013; American Psychological Association, 2008; NASW, 2005; Council on Social Work Education, 2015). This has resulted in more students being interested in sexual orientation issues in the helping professions. Of course, my experience in urban geographical settings may be influencing these experiences. Talking about sexual orientation diversity may be very different in Chicago than it is other areas of rural Illinois or other rural areas in the United States.

Several years ago, I developed an elective practice course on engaging people of diverse sexual orientation identities. Though I firmly believe that discussion about LGBTQ identities and other diverse identities needs to be infused across the curriculum, I enjoy having a concentrated opportunity to engage students in productive discussions about how social workers can make life better for LGBTQ-identified people. I am energized and encouraged by my students' interests in the lives and well-being of LGBTQ people. Hearing the stories of LGBTQ social work students who are willing to be open and authentic in their agencies also encourages me. Their stories are what encourage me to continue in my journey as a social work educator.

Future research must continue to explore the experiences of LGBTQ faculty in the helping professions. Additional narratives about the experiences of other LGBTQ faculty, including faculty reflections about decisions to disclose or forego disclosure, would be an excellent start to increasing discussion about LGBTQ faculty issues. Further, additional empirical research is needed to explore how experiences of openness and outness can positively impact faculty and student experiences in the classroom. Researchers should also examine whether there are differences in experiences of LGBTQ faculty in urban versus rural contexts. Coming out in the classroom may be quite different in major metropolitan areas versus more rural settings.

Additionally, much progress is still needed around LGBTQ social justice advocacy. If we are ever going to make a difference in responding to imbalances in privilege and power, social workers need to continue to have conversations around diversity. Great diversity exists even within the LGBTQ communities. For example, a white gay male from a higher socioeconomic class is often in a very different social position than a lesbian woman of color that is living in poverty. LGBTQ communities are complex. The complexities of the LGBTQ communities make the conversations around diversity to be challenging. Nonetheless, these conversations can be productive and significant. Our students will continue to explore their uncertainties about how to fit these discussions about sexual orientation identity into their cultural frameworks. Yet, social work educators can continue working to create a safe and respectful space for these conversations.

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Grief and Loss: Reflections Along the Journey to Healing

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Abstract: The grieving process is fraught with emotions that ebb and flow as one attempts to face the challenges and obstacles associated with grief. This paper examines the lived experiences of an academician, who diligently searched for opportunities to use grief experiences as mechanisms for transformation and education. A re-examination of the stage theory of grief offers a perspective on how one traverses the unexplored passages of grief. This paper examines a personal account of loss and grief, and moves into contextualizing the parallels that exist between grief and the change process that happens as one learns from a traumatic life event.

Keywords: grief theory, grief, change process, reflection

Do normal stages of grieving really exist? I do not know. What I am keenly aware of is that my grief is real and it fostered an altered reality in my world.

Introduction

I awoke to a faint knock at my front door to find a close relative standing there in tears. With trembling lips and a stammering tongue, she uttered words that I will never forget. "Your sister passed away about an hour ago," she said. Instantly, I screamed and ran for the closet…my safe space. Amid the clothes, shoes and various other worldly belongings, I collapsed under a wave of emotions. I yelled and screamed, remembering in an instant all of the things I said to my sister. I screamed even harder, because of all of the things I never told her. As the emotions continued to take root, the thought of her children being motherless in this ostensibly cruel world hit me like a freight train. In my mind, death had come too early for a seemingly, healthy 37-year old former track star and mother of three beautiful children. Dealing with death was not on my to-do list for that day. Yet there I was, reeling from the blow of that miserable news so early in the morning.

My plans for that day were thrown off by the news. On that day, I had plans to meet my class for the first meeting of the spring semester. I was prepared to discuss the syllabus, the learning projects for the semester, our group dynamics, and most importantly the secrets to success in our learning community. This news left me shaken to the core and exhausted. I was emotionally wrecked within a matter of minutes. Physical exhaustion settled in afterwards, because of all of the things I knew I would have to do…plan a funeral, clean my home, and prepare food. The list continued to mount in my mind. I was spiritually drained, because I had failed to feed my spirit. Yet, as I processed all that was going on in my mind and body, my analytical other pushed me into a place of resolve. I knew I would find a way to embrace the new reality life handed me that day.

What happens when life happens? The best-laid plans can be thwarted by traumatic life events. I resolved that a good teacher seizes every opportunity to learn from and impart knowledge to students, even during the most inopportune times. After several days, I returned to the classroom with a determination to use this experience as a tool to teach undergraduate social work students about dealing with the challenges that life hands you. Nevertheless, while these intentions were honest, actualizing my goals was not as easy as it seemed.

The beginning of life marks a pivotal moment of our human existence. Understanding this precious journey of life may cause some individuals to stumble. For those who are profoundly aware of the gift of life, the challenge becomes equally distressing when a life comes to an end. This reflective narrative uncovers the complexities of grief and loss combined with the external forces that created a definitive shift in my understanding of life in my world and imparting knowledge about resilience to undergraduate social work students. Essentially, this essay lays bare the truth about my experiences of loss, grief, and healing as an African-American female academician.

In the first portion of this narrative, I analyze my grief experience through the lens of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' model-the Five Stages of Grief. While this model has been challenged, reformed and reconfigured (Maciejewski, Zhang, Block & Prigerson, 2007; Wortman, 2007), the original template outlined in Kubler-Ross' seminal piece, On Death and Dying, offers a more accurate depiction of my personal journey through grief. Kubler-Ross (1969) identified five stages

of grief to include: 1) shock and disbelief/denial; 2) anger; 3) bargaining; 4) depression; 5) acceptance. Although Kubler-Ross fashioned this model to focus on the emotions and actions of terminally ill patients on a journey of dying (Kubler-Ross, 1969), scholars and practitioners have used this framework as a model for understanding grief after loss. In my linear approach to thinking and doing, this model was most useful for me to draw upon my experiences in grieving and healing. Additionally, I examine my experience using a lens of meaning making and the establishment of continuing bonds with my deceased loved-one. To that end, this essay takes the reader on that passage. It is a journey of understanding my emotions and actions connected to the loss of my baby sister. As I uncover my experiences through reflection, it is my intent to illuminate the parallel complexities of thinking back and moving forward, simultaneously. Drawing on theoretical elements that focus on reconstructing meaning, I also examine my journey to healing from this perspective. In the final portion of this narrative, I situate this journey of grief into the context of my role as a professional and an educator. Using the 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standard, I examine the usefulness of my personal experience in my space as teacher and a learner.

The Journey

Denial

Denying the loss of my sister came in the most austere way. Because I was not there when she took her last breath, I surmised that the doctors had gotten it wrong. I convinced myself that we would receive a telephone call with a retraction claiming that the medical professionals had made a blunder. The conversation would go like this,
Maam, I want to apologize for causing you such pain earlier this morning with that terrible news that your sister passed away. Actually, we made a mistake in communicating that information. Your sister is, in fact, alive and she's resting comfortably in her room. Again, I want to say how terribly sorry I am that we messed up. Do you have any questions?
I further deduced that this notion of death that interrupted our lives and the mistake that they made would be the topic of conversation at our next family get-together. I waited for several hours, but the call never came. I finally accepted the reality that I would never receive such a call. The reality of losing a sibling was foreign to me.

Anger

Honestly, I was angry! But, I did not know why or with whom. I was mad because I had lost Mom and Dad, and now my baby sister. I was angry because I tried so hard to build a relationship with her, but it never really seemed to take root. I was mad because she always acted mad. I was angry because we never really had a chance to deal with the whys and hows…the fundamental issues that plagued our relationship. I was angry because she left and did not tell me she was leaving. I was just mad!!! I recalled when we were children how she use to be the ultimate tomboy, and I was more of the homemaker type. I always felt that our disconnection stemmed from not having anything in common, other than a shared bloodline. I also felt that this disconnect was further exacerbated by the way people adored her and shunned me.

Now, my adult mind understood that we never really dealt with the blows that these issues landed on our relationship. Nonetheless, I still love her, and she will always be my sister, even though she is not on this side with us. I once heard a person say that having a sister is like having a built-in, best friend. How I wish that were our story! The more I think about being angry, the more I realized that my anger was really about me and my decision to accept that state of our relationship. I am angry with myself for not doing more to fix our brokenness.

With each passing day, I did not know whether I would encounter something or someone who would trigger a thought that lead to more thoughts. I had no answer for how it worked…no prescriptive approach to understanding how it worked for others. I soon realized that there were balms that help heal the hurt. Those comforts came in the form of time and tears.

In that moment, the moment where grief found me stricken with a sense of abysmal doom, there was a point where it felt like this thing called grief would take on a life of its own; it felt as if it would last forever. So thick was the hurt and murky the pain, it seemed as if that place would become my permanent place of residence and it ruled me with an iron fist. But then, like a sudden and unexpected snowstorm, a ray of hope revealed itself. Hope that came like a flood to cast away

all hurt for the moment was the balm that lifted me from the desperate place of hurt. This thing called hope came with time, and it manifested itself in such a way that it almost felt elusive. With time, healing began, and through time peaceful waters emerged.

The tears came suddenly, as suddenly as the news of her death. Honestly, in the moment that the devastating news was delivered to me, I felt as though the wind got knocked out of me with the sheer force of a battering ram. All I could do was reach for air that seemed to be gone. When I finally recovered from the initial blow, I felt a stinging sensation welling up and the tears flowed…a little at first. In the days leading up to the funeral, I put on an armor of steel. Displaying strength was what I had been taught to do. I realized that being strong for others left no time for personal tears…not even in the quiet and stillness of night. Real tears did not flow until I stood at the threshold of the sanctuary on the day we buried our sister. As I moved closer to the front of the funeral procession, my feet felt as though there were two bricks strapped to them. A gentle nudge from our youngest sibling ushered in a flood of tears like no other. As I stood there sobbing profusely, I was stricken with a sense of shame. I was too ashamed to be so vulnerable with even my closest relatives. I was too ashamed to allow my tears to reveal the truth, the truth that I was not made of steel, and that tears were a part of me.

In time, the truth about those tears became a clearer revelation to me. My tears became a river of healing, and like a river, they flowed, regardless. Just as water finds its way around a rock in the riverbed, so did my tears find their way around all of the stuff I tried to use to block them. No matter how much I poured myself into my work or how engaged I became in any given project, the tears found their way out. Sometimes, they came in the midst of a certain task, and sometimes for no apparent reason at all. I remember one instance quite vividly.

Bargaining

While brief, bargaining is a marked by an effort to postpone, push aside or negotiate the inevitable. After receiving the news of my sisters passing, there was no time to bargain for more time or negotiate for another chance. The reality of not having this option pricked my heart. In past experiences of losing a loved one, I attempted to bargain…to beg for reprieve…to ask for one sliver of time with that individual that I held so dear. Not this time. The news came so suddenly; there was hardly time to process the conversation I had with my sister some six hours before she passed. If the chance were open to bargain, I would have done so. My plea would have been to have a few more days with my sister so that we could have a difficult conversation concerning our relationship. It always bothered me that my sister and I were not very close. I held a deep yearning to really understand why our relationship manifested negatively. For many years, I reasoned that it was because she just did not understand me. I reasoned that it was because I was incredibly different from her and everyone else. If I had the chance to bargain, I would have asked for the time, space and courage to delve into a conversation about this topic.

Depression

In the days and weeks following my sisters passing, I pushed depression aside. There was no time to retreat into my emotions and withdraw from those around me. My role as the rock for my family precluded a chance to sink into despair. Depression finally came after two months of grieving her loss. At first, there were psychosomatic issues that seemed all-too familiar, having grieved the loss of my parents off and on for the previous twelve years. Then, came the periods in time where I did not and would not venture into the company of others. I simply did not have the strength or desire to do it. I just wanted to be left alone to immerse myself in my thoughts and emotions about my sister and her absence. I was okay with feeling sorry for myself, and not trying to focus on the promise that everything would be alright. It was not all right, I was not all right, and I was okay with that. There was a surreal feeling of being okay in my broken, sad state. I have vivid memories of ruminations about my sisters final moments on Earth. I wondered if she called out to anyone or is she faded away peacefully. I wondered if she sought comfort in seeing familiar faces. These thoughts sent me into a deeper depression, because of all of the unknown variables that I could not and did not know. For me, bouts of depression impacted personal relationships with those around me. I simply wanted to be left alone, but, in their infinite wisdom, those who knew me best and loved me most would not allow me to slip away into the darkness of depression.

Acceptance

To say the least, my truth about acceptance in this journey is awkwardly unique. The truth is that there are still days where I find myself revisiting many of the stages of grief. I have learned that there is often no real reason why I am caught in such tailspin. There is usually a mitigating factor that explains these visits to the other places where grief takes an individual. However, the stage of acceptance has become a welcome peace for me on most days. Acceptance was fostered in as quickly as the news of my sisters passing, and it brought with it respite and a deeper understanding of the relationship between my sister and I. It happened one day as I was going through some of my sisters belongings. I stumbled up on her journal. At first, I felt like I was invading her privacy, but there was something about the cover of this manuscript that compelled me to read it. As I combed through her thoughts, I learned that we had something in common. The girl with the beautiful smile and the spit-fire personality, the one who was a stand-out athlete and beauty queen, the girl who won the hearts of most everyone she met…that girl, my sister, also struggled. My sister penned a snippet of her reality when she wrote:

> I'm 26-years old, and in the beginning, since I was old enough to remember, I've been a pretty little black girl. At first it was just another thing I heard. I admit though, it did get me through the years of thinking the being dark skinned was a curse and the all the light skinned girls were looked upon as goddesses.

In her journal, she talked at length about the disconnection between the two of us. In that moment, I realized that part of my struggle in accepting her death was steeped in issues surrounding our relationships. All of the unspoken and unexplained matters that had long plagued our relationship were catalysts for fostering anger, denial and depression. With this newfound understanding of our struggle, a veil of heaviness was lifted from me. The window of opportunity to understand her side of the story had passed. At this juncture, I had options. I could remain stuck in my grief or find a way to make sense of the nuggets of introspection that she had left behind in her writings.

Reconstructing Meaning

In a matter of weeks, I began to reframe my thoughts about my sisters death and her life. I embraced this new knowledge that she, just as I, had known the challenges of our relationship. Reading my sisters journal was effective catharsis for me, because I was able to get a glimpse of our relationship from her perspective. Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) explain that an important element of meaning making rests in the ability of the bereaved to identify as a survivor, while making sense of the loss or finding benefit in the experience of grieving the loss of someone. After reading several entries from my sisters journal, I reflected on the last year of our time together. Even as she battled a number of chronic illnesses, I now realize that she understood the severity of her ailments and she knew that her health would rapidly decline over a short time. While she did not openly share this with me, there was evidence of reconciliatory behavior that indicated regret for past hurts and misunderstandings. I have come to believe that she too wrestled with the state of our relationship, and that she also had a desire to mend the brokenness between us. Ultimately, this knowledge helped bring about a measure of acceptance and a healthy dose of peace.

Journey Onward

Through the journey of grief, the arduous process of healing seems elusive. While difficult as it may be, there is solace in knowing that, for me, healing emerges with the passing of time. The Council on Social Work Education 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards identifies a need to demonstrate ethical and professional behavior, as a primary competency of a professional social worker (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). A component behavior attached to this competency implores social workers to use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). As an academician, teaching is my practice, and a major focus of my practice is to foster an environment that helps students understand the interconnections that exist between their personal and professional life, and to help them use this knowledge to inform their pathway to becoming a professional. I constantly implore my students to deal with latent issues that may impede their ability to establish rapport and guide clients through the change process. Goldblatt-Hyatt (2014) appropriately

cautions practitioners about the pitfalls of self-disclosure and the potential counter-productive influence on the client. However, Brew and Kottler (2017) posit that self-disclosure is useful for several reasons, including the need to demonstrate ways of dealing with difficult situations (p. 272). Similarly, they state that self-disclosure is useful when one needs to take yourself off the pedestal and make yourself appear more human (Brew and Kottler, 2017, p. 272). A safe measure of self-disclosure has proven to be an appropriate tool for teaching students about the balance of work and life that must exist when they enter the field of practice. During the semester of my devastating loss, there were two incidents where I openly discussed the general challenges that I faced in my grieving state.

As I journeyed through the grieving process, there was an occasion where I vividly remember that my emotions and feelings were overwhelming. Yet, I tried to move beyond this place, because I wanted to do what came natural to me and move to a place of normalcy. For me, that place is in the classroom engaged in teaching. Looking back, I realize that I returned to the classroom too soon, and that I had not developed a healthy coping mechanism when my emotions got the better of me. Only a week after burying my sister, I returned to the classroom. In one of my class sessions that I week, a flood of emotions overwhelmed me, and try as I might, nothing I did made them go away. During this particular class meeting, we engaged in a dynamic discussion about the experiences of women in the United States, and this discussion was followed by a short video. As the lights dimmed and the video started, I retreated to a seat behind the podium and sobbed silently. When the video ended and we re-convened the discussion, a student asked a very pointed question. She said, "What's wrong with you, Dr. M?", as she remarked about the noticeable traces of tears. I briefly shared that I had very recently suffered the loss of a close relative, and promptly dismissed class. To these students, the impenetrable Dr. must have looked like she was losing her mind. Giving voice to the personal struggle of grief and loss helped shed light on the fact that we all face various life challenges that shape our understanding and knowing in the world around us. In that moment, I became profoundly cognizant of how social workers can use a myriad of situations to help elevate their client's understanding about life and its unfolding issues. Livsey (1999) highlights the importance of openness and vulnerability, to ourselves and to others within the teaching arena. For me, these elements open the doorway of inquiry and knowledge transfer through reflection and action, for the student and the teacher. In that moment, I learned that students need to see vulnerability is modeled, even in the classroom. Conversely, they have to learn how to appreciate and create boundaries between them and the clients they serve.

Months after my loss, I remember walking into the classroom with a plan to lecture about healthy family relationships; the conversation shifted in an instant when a student offered condolences. Initially, I was taken aback, because I was not prepared to acknowledge my recent loss. Since the class discussion centered on parental influences with regard to child development, we talked at length about the relationships that exist between siblings and between children and parents. As students began to recall their experiences as children, they asked about my childhood. During that class period, I experienced a healthy measure of self-disclosure, as I made correlations between parenting styles and varying relationships between sibling sets. Nods of affirmation were evident, as students silently reflected on their experiences as children. As I left class that day, I walked away knowing that my grief had not taken me to another emotional space as I openly discussed some of the dynamics of my family. While that day went well for me, there were others that were not as successful.

One outcome of this journey through grief is that I take a different approach to helping students understand this connectedness. I teach students that a good practitioner is committed to dealing with personal challenges within his/her life before embarking upon a quest to help clients confront their life challenges, thus my reason for giving them a glimpse into the pain that I suffered after the loss of my beloved sister. Goldsworthy (2005) theorizes that practitioners must explore applications of grief and loss theory beyond death and dying. In the swell of helping clients learn coping skills, practitioners have the knowledge and ability to help clients understand practical applications of grief and loss theory in reference to a number of issues they may face in life.

Conclusion

Passing on this course in life has made me keenly aware that the theories of grief and loss are inextricably linked, and are helpful for understanding the actions and reactions of those we serve. As I traveled on my path to healing, I learned to pay careful attention to people, places and things that represented triggers into grief. While I did all that I could to avoid them, many could not be skirted. It was in those moments when I realized that most everyone has his or her own story of grief and loss. Whether it is a loss of a loved one or loss of financial stability, the journey is real. The emotions can be raw, and resilience is also an option. Moving on from this place requires a strength and resolve that seems elusive at first, but these elements become more familiar with time. In the space where theory and practice collide and where the client meets the professional, there is hope borne out of the pain of change and a knowing that fosters healing.

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A Caterpillar Morphs Into a Butterfly

Stephanie Lyu Rhee

Abstract: Teaching connotes more than disseminating knowledge. Teaching opens up students' habitual cocoons and exposes them to new ideas and ways of thinking so that students are encouraged to question and challenge their established assumptions, knowledge, values, and/or beliefs. I believe such metamorphosis can occur in our students and, as a teacher, I can be the essential and integral part of such a transforming process. However, metamorphosis can also be a two-way process between teacher and student. This paper is also about my own journey of awakening.

Keywords: teaching, students' learning, transformation, social work

"Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly." Such a spectacular metamorphosis points me to a challenging question: Can teaching engender such a metamorphosis in our students? Preoccupied with such question in my mind, I embarked on my academic career in the Fall of 2014 as a freshly minted Ph.D. but a seasoned social work practitioner. I naively believed that I would be able to provide students with substantial opportunities for new ideas and ways of thinking so that students would be able to eat away those opportunities, challenge their own assumptions, values, and/or beliefs, and open their habitual cocoons. I firmly believed such metamorphosis could occur in our students and, as a teacher, I can be the essential and integral part of such a transformational process. I assumed that my undergraduate students would be eager to learn, and I would be able to quench their thirst for learning with innovative teaching methodologies. I was also eager to enhance their self-efficacy and expand their worldviews. I believed that regardless of students' background, they deserve high quality education, and I would not compromise my standard of excellence in order to be popular. I assumed that grades are a mere reflection of their industriousness and performance thereof, and I would be understanding but challenging in my way to transform my students from caterpillars into butterflies.

I knew in order to accomplish all my objectives and meet my own expectations, I needed to engage my students in my classroom. So, the first thing I did was to try to turn my classroom into an active learning environment where students are encouraged and motivated to participate. I implemented an active learning technique called the team-based learning developed by Larry Michaelsen (see Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2002). This shift to active learning has been a huge transition for me as well since I grew up in the culture of passive learning that mainly focuses on didactic "lecture flowing like a heavy downpour into a storm drain" (Royse, 2001, p. 66). I have, however, always felt that didactic learning can stifle students' curiosity and critical thinking ability and further prevent students from being exposed to different paradigms. I strongly felt that the team-based learning technique would motivate students toward more effective learning.

The team-based learning can help students develop teamwork skills and personal commitment that are essential for social work practice. Students can be divided into small teams, and students in each team have the opportunity to express, exchange, and share their ideas and feelings. In the team-based learning, students learn to be accountable and responsible for their own behaviors and actions. One of the major features of the team-based learning is that students come to class prepared and motivated so that they are expected to take a test before getting any lectures.

I assumed that students would welcome the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and also enjoy exchanging and sharing their ideas as well as being accountable for their own actions. I soon realized that it was a false assumption on my part. When I asked students to take a test before getting lectures, some students voiced their concerns over their grades. However, I ignored their concerns thinking that they were not used to this new way of doing things and would eventually come around to this new method, especially if their performances in class improve. I was eager and enthusiastic, and never suspected that my assumptions, values, and beliefs might be wrong. I charged forward-that is until one cold Thursday evening class.

It was a dark rainy Thursday evening–a type of day where you might expect students missing their class, but despite the temptations, a majority of students showed up in my class. However, students looked very inert and exhausted after a long day at work or at school. The lackluster florescent lights in the classroom seemed to further drain the last ounce of energy from students.

Immediately after I introduced the agenda to the class, I asked students to close their textbooks and notes and take their individual test on the assigned reading for 20 minutes. Heavy sounds of students' sighs swept across the otherwise hushed classroom. Despite this, once each student received the test, I kept telling myself that students must have been well adjusted to the so-called teem-based learning approach since it has been a few weeks since the semester started. Twenty minutes finally passed and students handed in their tests.

I said, "Everyone knows the routine by now." Reminding students that they all should know the next step, I nevertheless asked students to get together in their assigned team. I handed out a copy of the same test they took individually to each team. Students rapidly converged in their teams to work on their task at hand. Their discussion suddenly reenergized the room, and I couldn't help thinking that students were actually enjoying the team-based learning. I also found myself engulfed in the warm and gratifying feeling that my innovation was finally working. I was patting myself on my back as an innovative teacher who was successful in motivating my students to learn for themselves.

Then the bottom dropped. When I reconvened the class after the activity, one of the students exclaimed, "I am not learning anything out of this group thing…I am a single mom, working hard every day…no time to study the textbook but I have been an A student…I paid expensive tuition for getting no lecture…I don't see anything good about this course…" Her sudden outburst and the emotionally charged words completely caught me off guard. I could not remember her spiteful speech word for word, but I could still vividly recall her resentful stare and defiant posture. A female student who had struck me as quiet, soft-spoken, and reserved, instantly transformed herself into an unyielding rebellious student. To make the situation worse, two other students, claiming to be her close friends, stood up and took her side. They looked overly strident and indignant. The climax of their defiance happened when they grabbed their backpacks and walked out of the classroom immediately after their outburst even before the conclusion of the class.

For a moment, I was speechless. Every student was looking around and trying to gauge my reaction to this sudden incident. It was not clear to me whether the majority of my students agreed with these mutinous students or not. Regardless, I was highly offended by their unprofessional conducts and their lack of consideration and respect for faculty. It took me a few days to recover from this incident. My confidence was shaken, and I started to doubt myself as a teacher. I kept wondering what I did wrong. Why did they act the way they did? What would the rest of the class think of me as their professor? Did I make the right choice to be a teacher? I was on an emotional roller coaster, but eventually I realized that what was important was for me to learn from this incident, not to fall victim to the situation at hand. So, I started to reflect about what happened in my class leading up to the incident.

Students learn best when they are engaged. No matter how fundamental and essential knowledge teachers can offer, and no matter how innovative a teaching method can be, students may not appreciate them if they are not interested in the first place. So the student-centered learning is an important concept to remember as in 'start where the client is" is an important principle to social work practice. I realized that students' behaviors and perceptions are socially and culturally constructed since they are shaped by their own past educational and social experience. I kept repeating to myself the following questions: What if students have been molded by an educational system where teaching is a didactic way of transmitting knowledge to students; what if students were conditioned to be passive learners in the classroom rather than active learners; what if students grew up in a grade-conscious culture in which grades are the only way to reflect their accomplishments?

While reflecting on these questions, I began to realize that outer layers of my students' cocoons had been so heavily coated with the culture of passive learning that my innovative teaching method did not even make a dent in their cocoons. How foolish I was in thinking

that it would be strong enough to peel them off for a change. Their negative reactions toward my new teaching method were natural– people tend to resist something that is not familiar, or they do not want to experience discomfort due to change. I finally stumbled onto a very painful awakening that the incident was an SOS distress signal from students. The fatal mistake I realized was that I did not start the process with where my students were. Despite their various and different faces, ages, gender, races, ethnicities, classes, and personal and educational backgrounds, I only saw one common denominator: the outcome of deeper learning. My students might have perceived me as a teacher with a tunnel vision that ignored all the contextual and relational aspects involved in students' learning. The principle of 'start where students are' should have been a crucial lesson in implementing this new pedagogical method for me.

Gallup published a study where college graduates were more engaged in work and successful in life if they made a connection with their professors on the campus who cared about them, encouraged them to seek their hopes and dreams, and stimulated their learning (Ray & Kafka, 2014). The importance of affective learning emphasizing relational qualities such as caring, fostering connection, and helpfulness is not new in social work education (Rodriguez-Keyes, Schneider, & Keenan, 2013). However, building connection requires the concept of acceptance, which is one of the fundamental components of the connectedness. Each student brings his/her unique personality, personal and educational background and experience, levels of interest and motivation, and learning style. Not all undergraduate students belong to a so-called 'normative' category comprising young high school graduates with full time status. Some students are non-traditional and work full time or multiple part-time jobs. Child care and/or family care are another addition to their multiple responsibilities. Time to study is a luxury that my students might not have. They are all aware that a college diploma is a time-consuming but worthy goal for them for their future career success, so they may view a college as an instrumental means to future career rather than as a pursuit of pure truth and deeper learning. As such, they might perceive good grades and performance as an essential path to graduation. Without understanding students' motivation for learning, we as teachers cannot expect for learning to take place in a meaningful way. I now realize that I failed to become aware of such motivation when I implemented the new teaching methodology. As a teacher from a relatively old and different generation, I was perhaps blinded by my own idealistic expectation and/or excitement for teaching innovation.

This unforgettable incident of my first semester led to my personal awakening and transformation. I reexamined my values, beliefs, and assumptions about teaching and realized that I was unaware of crucial factors affecting students' learning, including their cultures, their levels of interest and motivation, their personal and educational background and experiences, their learning styles, as well as the community where they grew up. I did not give much thought to those considerations when I was teaching.

After a week-long disheartening and reflective nights and days, I faced the inevitable reality that I should go back to face my students directly. It was about time for me to show how ready I would be to embrace them no matter how resistant they are. Feeling nervous but calm, I entered the classroom with a renewed conviction and invigoration. The classroom was so quiet that at first I thought I entered an empty room. All students showed up in class on time, looking very inquisitive as if they were eager to watch the final episode of a popular soap opera. The student of the incident was sitting on her usual chair, as if she were blessed with amnesia. I started to draw a small sail boat on the blackboard, and while I was doing that, I felt my students' puzzled and stealthy eyes back of my head. I then acknowledged that our boat drifted a bit in high winds, but "after a storm comes a calm," so we now have to come all together to sail forward to reach our final destination at the end of the semester. I continued to deliver my concession speech, saying that after I reconsidered the complex and abstract concepts of the course content as well as students' higher levels of anxiety associated with grades, I decided to tweak the team-based learning method. Starting that day, students received my lecture first and took a review test individually and in a group, which made them become less anxious about grades and more eager to learn. My potentially disastrous event turned into a blessing in disguise since it allowed me to learn from my mistakes and also helped my students to learn more as a result.

Since the incident, I have been making extra efforts to understand where my students are coming from, meet them at where they are initially, and build relationships to get connected with them during the semester. To enhance students' learning, I have modified my pedagogy from a team-based learning to a group-based learning so that students have been assigned to many different groups throughout the semester and be given more opportunities to interact with other classmates and exchange their diverse ideas and thoughts. I have also tried to improve my teaching by seeking advice and guidance from experienced faculty members who have applied active learning pedagogies, reading teaching guidebooks, and seeking students' feedback on my teaching frequently.

Looking back on my own journey, I realized that I was a victim of my own hubris-assuming that there is only one best teaching method for students' learning. My personal realization is that teaching and learning requires continual personal change. Good teaching is a complex process that involves not only knowledge and skills but also interaction and relationship between students and teachers. My journey is an ongoing balancing act between teaching and learning; however, I am learning that I need to open up my own cocoon before opening up others'.

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Sticky Bombs!

Coughlan O'Meara

Abstract: Changes in personal perspectives can occur through Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984). A learner's reflections on real-world experiences, with understanding towards action, can assist future experiential learning course designers. Experiential Learning Theory provides teachers with opportunities to facilitate personalized approaches to teaching and learning in and outside of a classroom. Teachers as scholars and practitioners can, through experiential theory and practice, increase their ability to engage students in learning.

Keywords: Experiential Pedagogy; Educational Theory

On a sunny and crisp morning, my daughter and I left her grandparents' house and headed down Nichols Lane to play at a park in the center of town. I relished the time I had to spend with my daughter, to be outside and in the world of a 6 year-old. As a parent I find the demands outside of my family extending beyond the "workday," this opportunity to be completely present with my daughter was a gift. I thought too that I would "check-in" about her year in first grade. She grabbed my hand as we turned the corner for downtown; I started with my questions about school, "Do you enjoy working with the math materials or listening to Ms. D talk?"

By now we were next to a hedge along a sidewalk leading to town, letting go of my hand and running ahead of me, she replied, "I like journaling and writing down what Ms. D says about Africa." I thought for sure I knew my daughter as an active learner; but she identified herself as a watcher, listening and recording information from her teacher (Kolb, 1984). As I recovered from this surprise, I realized that I no longer held her hand and she was well in front of me, and I needed to catch up.

A bit out of breath, I said, "What about the college students who help you with science? Aren't you going to do demonstrations soon?" She replied, "That will be fun when we go outside." I thought, perhaps an experience through sensory stimulation might finally ensure that the learning cycle I committed my professional life to studying was recognized through my first grader.

As I reflected on what just transpired, my daughter took a quick turn to the left, and directed me down a secret path my wife showed her the previous summer. As we made our first moves along the path in the direction of the park she said, "The last time Elle (her cousin) and I walked through here, we picked up sticky bombs. "A trip I missed last summer was being brought back into focus; "sticky bombs," I said bewildered.

For the first time on our new path between the hedges, my daughter turned to face me. As she looked at me her eyes became bigger and she declared, "STICKY BOMBS," with great authority, as if I should have already known of their existence. Displaying a slight smile, she continued, "Mom and Uncle Jack told Elle and me not to touch them, but we did." "Oh," I said still fixated on our earlier conversation about first grade and where I went wrong with my attempt to explore learning with my daughter.

Before I could reflect further on my missteps my daughter said, "Uncle Jack and Mom told Elle and me that we learned our lesson picking up sticky bombs." In my family, Black walnut trees are known for their dark brown yellowish stain created by squeezing the greenish, sometimes brown depending upon the time of year, skin surrounding the nut. A sticky glue like substance oozes when the circular "bomb" is squeezed, and is where the name "sticky bomb" originates. A moment alone with my daughter to reflect on learning in school during a sunny walk to play in the park dashed by STICKY BOMBS!

A concrete sensory experience, touching a sticky something between the hedges along Water Street, converged new memories with old as she led me down her secret path. The result was a warning about sticky bombs and recognition of their importance by my daughter. My earlier questioning about the formal environment where learning is supposed to be obvious, school, took a left turn between the hedges.

Personalized learning through abstract conceptualization and active experimentation was now my guide along a "secret path." Where did I go wrong

in my earlier line of questioning? I had little time to further contemplate, as we moved to Follow the Leader, I watched as my daughter set a course and we exited the hedges.

As a new parent I developed strategies to provide for my daughter, learning to meet her needs out of survival. Now, as the father of a 6 year-old I learn through shared experiences, watching and reflecting, to determine future actions. Life experiences become moments for learning and a model of experiential pedagogy. Teaching and learning in more traditional environments can become disconnected from students' interests and desires. The somewhat sterile line of questioning used in school: "Take out your textbooks, turn to page 165; who has questions about the wonderful Aztec Civilization?" Learners, at whatever age, would rather explore THEIR world through THEIR eyes, not someone else's world through someone else's eyes. As education looks to engage in learning outside of school, educators must find moments where learning occurs naturally and make it purposeful. I did not ruin my daughter's moment of sheer "play" as we moved closer to town and our destination.

My daughter grabbed my hand as we prepared to use a crosswalk, and I said, "Mom and Uncle Jack know a lot about walking in between the hedges, you and Elle are lucky." She turned to me and said, "Yeah, I bet they got in a lot of trouble!" We arrived safely on the other side of the road, and she hopped like a bunny, sometimes on one foot and flapped her hands by her side like a bird. I followed behind mimicking these behaviors as we continued with Follow the Leader. By this point my lesson about sticky bombs had ended. But my daughter taught me a great deal about learning through seemingly trivial acts. I now know that she must understand the meaning of her own experiences, meaning that she can converge with information outside of school and within its walls.

I have grown increasingly concerned about the lack of engagement I've seen and experienced over the last 14 years as a public school educator. What if educators were able to facilitate learning through students naturally occurring experiences? Allowing them to explore their areas of interest through THEIR EYES? Teachers, as content experts, would recognize learning born through a path designed by their students. As a student explored learning through personalized means, "the content," and processes of thinking would emerge as it did on my walk to play at the park downtown with my daughter. In a moment last summer my daughter's interests took over, and she touched a sticky bomb. This experience became part of her memory and she was able to retrieve it during our walk into town. She assumed a role, during our walk, from which to actively experiment as my guide between the hedges, teaching me about sticky bombs.

Experiential learning provides any age student moments to reflect and integrate the theoretical into their lives. Experiential learning was designed for: active involvement, reflection on the experiences, conceptualization and comprehension of experiences towards the investigation of new ideas (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning involves naturally occurring processes of the brain: (sensory cortex) accessing ideas, (temporal cortex) making sense of ideas, (prefrontal cortex) generating new meaning from ideas, and (motor cortex) taking action based on ideas (Zull, 2002).

The biology of learning explains Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential education. To gather, analyze, design, and act are characteristics of experiential pedagogy and the brain's natural learning cycle (Zull, 2002). A 6 year-old and a 16 year-old learner participates in experiential learning using the four regions of their brain connecting experiences to content while developing/reframing their perspectives. Experiential learning, facilitating instinctive phases of thinking, is pedagogy fit for the novice and skilled learner.

Equitable pedagogy in a classroom understands acts of engagement in and outside of school through the predictable and unpredictable. Experiential learning provides new learning spaces within a classroom and a learner's community. For example, in my classroom, as a need arose for reliable transportation in the community, students studied possible sources for transportation, surveyed populations to determine transportation preferences, identified ways to address secure transportation systemically in the County, and sourced sustainable transportation options for reliable transportation. Experiential learning in communities draws students into a discipline, helping them to see the real-world application of a course's content.

Forms of experiential learning include service-learning

(academic learning combined with service in communities), cooperative work experience (arranged work experience by school and employer leading towards an occupational goal), internships (coordinated experiences allowing students to participate in the workplace for a period of time), apprenticeships (on-the-job training to gain a license to practice in a regulated profession), job shadows, and various paid or unpaid work (Bailey, Hughes, & Moore, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Moore, 2010, 2013).

A father-daughter walk into town to play at the park became an occurrence, one I hadn't anticipated, in what's most important in learning. My efforts to recognize my daughter as a learner in first grade became a lesson in sticky bombs and Follow the Leader. Simply put, the capacity to be purposeful about learning within seemingly insignificant experiences provides instances to construct knowledge.

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Teaching as Practice: A Mobile Phone Points the Way

Amy K. Fisher

Abstract: This is the story of how one student's phone helped me become consciously aware of the intersection of teaching and social work practice. Aspects of this view illuminated by the story are discussed.

Keywords: Teaching as practice

It just didn't make sense. Nina (not her real name) was so bright-eyed and engaged in class. She gave excellent, well thought-out responses to the questions I posed. She was able to use relatively sophisticated reasoning to help her find her way through problems. I had been looking forward to reading her response to our first assignment, a low-stakes reflection designed to give me a good idea where students were academically and professionally. But when I downloaded the paper from our University's online learning system, it wasn't good. There were so many grammatical errors, misspellings, and formatting issues that I really had to work to decipher what she was trying to say. Not wanting to give up hope, I speculated to myself that maybe she had gotten in a time crunch, or maybe she realized how low-stakes the assignment was and just didn't put in her best effort. I diligently provided feedback. I explained, again, about APA style. I asked her to find someone to proofread her papers (including a reminder about our writing center), and included an invitation to meet with me to discuss her work. The next class, she was again bright-eyed and engaged, providing her usual insightful contributions to class. I asked her if she got my feedback, and she responded yes. I can't remember exactly what else was said, but I assumed the next paper would improve.

The next paper. I eagerly opened it up, and…no improvement. It may have been worse than the paper before. I could not believe my eyes. What in the world was going on with this student? I again diligently provided feedback, including praise for her performance in class and my dismay over her papers. This time I asked her to meet with me. The next class period, she seemed subdued.

"Have you seen my feedback on your paper?" I asked.

“Yes.”

I waited for her to propose a meeting time as I had requested. She did not.

"Did you see my request for a meeting?"

She slumped her shoulders, "I work full-time days until 3 a.m. and I take of my babies when I'm not in class and right after my last class is out I have to catch a ride with friends, and I can't make them wait."

"Wow, when do you do your homework?"

"At work during breaks and slow times."

The light bulb in my brain switched on.

I asked, "What kind of machine are you using to write your papers?"

She held up her phone.

I thought, "She writes papers on her phone. While she is at work. Because she has two small children and is a single mother and can't get child care while she does homework. She has to work full-time because she can no longer get student loans."

I am in awe of the weight that some of our students carry.

She couldn't see my feedback because the comments could only be seen in a word processing program and not on her phone. When I said "feedback," she thought "grades," which were not good. No wonder she seemed dejected. She was not seeing the praise I was doling out, the suggestions for improvement, or corrections. She was only seeing the numbers assigned.

What to do? We are social workers. We are highly trained in problem-solving. Without even thinking about it, I launched into problem-solving mode.

"Do you know about the computer labs on campus?" Nina shook her head. I explained and mentioned that she should have gotten the information during orientation. It turned out that she was unable to attend the transfer orientation that would have informed her about the labs because she had to work. She had transferred from junior college, a common transition for our department. I explained about her free access to the computer labs.

"Is there a time you could go to the computer labs and use them?" I asked.

She shook her head, shoulders still slumped, and restated her need to work and her dependence on others for transportation.

"Okay, that's before and after class, what about between classes?"

"Yes!" There was a period of about two and half hours she could use, two days a week.

"Fantastic. Why not compose your papers on your phone, email them to yourself, open them on a word processor in the lab, and edit them there?"

She sat up straight, bright-eyed once again, and said "I can do that!"

The next paper was a thing of beauty, at least in comparison to the others. Nina had such a great heart for social work and the critical thinking skills to go with it. When she had the time, she consistently turned in one of the top papers in the class. She still struggled with time management on and off throughout the semester, and pushed her absences to the limit with sick children. But she did it. I got the most moving email from her at the end of the semester (more about this below). She saw that I believed in her and that gave her the momentum to not give up. She graduated and is now using her social work degree in her professional work.

When I think about significant stories in my journey as an educator, this is one that always comes to mind, even years later. However, pinpointing just what was it about this story that so profoundly affected me took some time and effort. What did it have to teach me? As I began the process of reflection on that question, I had several false starts. I wrote a sermon about under-prepared teaching, and promptly deleted it. I traced my own process of coming to terms with academia, and then erased that, too. Although both reflections were helpful to me in their own right, they had little to do with this story. I needed to find what it was about this particular story that was trying to get my attention. An incident that kept coming to mind was when a colleague stated, "Teaching is my practice." I intuitively resonated with the idea, but could not define it. The process of trying to understand the significance of Nina's story led me to an exploration of the idea of teaching as practice, and ultimately to an answer to my question.

I discovered that teaching as practice has a long history in social work. I found works discussing everything from how educators model social work behaviors (Barretti, 2007), to applying social work theory to the classroom (Edwards & Richards, 2002; Wang, 2012) and applying practice principles to teaching qualitative research (Ruckdeschel & Shaw, 2002). Although I had been aware of Bertha Reynolds' 1942 treatise "Learning and Teaching in Social Work," I had not really dug into it. I was delighted to find many principles of social work practice applied to social work education. For example, although the principle of "meeting our clients where they are" is fundamental to social work practice, I had not consciously and intentionally applied it to teaching. Reynolds considered the perspective to be the first principle of teaching, and even stated, "We wonder how anyone could ever have expected to do educational work without knowing those who were to be educated" (Reynolds, 1942, p. 202). One of the struggles I experience as an educator is where to draw the line at which I expect students to meet *me*.

Nina's story educated me about meeting our students where they are by teaching me to really see each student as a human being rather than drawing a line. As Reynolds states:

> [W]e do not find presenting themselves for learning in social work detached intellects or even detached personalities. We find biological organisms which must survive and eat and find their mates. We find social beings who want an honorable place in society for themselves and their children. (Reynolds, 1942, p. 68).

Nina provided a critical reminder for me that she was a

human being with a full and active life outside the classroom. Prior to teaching, I had practiced social work for many years in a university counseling center, and had been well aware of the potential for tension between the student as learner and the student as human being. However, in the press of trying to ensure learning objectives and tenure-track responsibilities were met, this awareness had receded into the background. Yes, our students must come to class with the fundamental capacity to do the work, but I realized that it can look very different from one student to another.

Nina's story also drove home the idea that what we model can be even more important than what we say (see, e.g., Barretti, 2007). As Gillian Ruch, states about social work supervision, "We can only relate to and communicate with [clients] to the extent to which we are related to and communicated with" (Ruch, 2016). Nina most definitely noticed me relating to and communicating with her. This is the email she sent at the end of the semester:
I just feel the need to tell you that you have had the biggest influence on [my] career thus far….There have been many times where I wanted to throw the towel in. When I turned in that first assignment, I did not do so well. It was like you were thinking this girl can do better than this, and you helped me come up with strategies to maintain, and that meant so much to me….when someone with no ties to me steps and makes me feel worthy, it means so much to me….Thanks Dr. Fisher, you are truly a professional and are good at what you do (Personal communication, December 16, 2014).

By sharing this email, I do not wish to "toot my own horn." I share it to illustrate my awakening to just how closely students are watching me model social work. As I reflected on this email, the "light bulb" once again switched on. The student saw the strengths perspective ("you were thinking this girl can do better than this"), problem-solving ("strategies to maintain"), and recognized professional social work behavior ("you are truly a professional"). I am still often stunned by the power inherent in my role as educator.

Modeling works both ways, of course. I have received feedback on teaching evaluations that brilliantly illustrate the ways in which I do not model good social work practice behaviors. For example, my students have told me that my responses to questions are not always helpful. I struggled with how to get better at this in the context of teaching, but framing the problem in the context of modeling social work behaviors gives me clarity and specific actions I am comfortable with and confident in successfully carrying out. I can ask questions to find out what the question really is without wrapping it in my own assumptions and expectations. I can model meeting the student asking the question where she is.

And so I arrived at the answer (at least for now) of why this interaction with Nina had so profoundly affected me. Teaching as practice has implications for me on two levels. On a personal note, I feel at home in the world of social work. I spent many years practicing social work before moving into academia. The skills and values of the profession come as naturally to me as breathing. I do not yet always feel so at home in the world of academia. I often flounder, not knowing how to move through a given situation in the classroom. I try to figure out how a "good teacher" would handle the issue. However, now I know that in moments of need, I can reach for that intersection of social work and teaching.

On a much broader level, however, I have become aware of the ways in which I model social work practice for the students in my classes. Nina stated that I had "had the biggest influence on [her] career thus far." Just as we model behaviors for our clients, we model behaviors for our students. They see us as examples of professional social workers. It is an awesome charge, and one I feel empowered to shoulder now that I see it so clearly.

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Contextualizing Practice in Cambodia: A Hidden Living Place with Practice Insight

Monit Cheung and Michelle Srader

Abstract: This article is not a first-person narrative but rather a cultural reflection after a study-abroad program in Cambodia that aimed to provide an approach for promoting a deeper appreciation of international social work practice. We (the authors) describe and analyze our interactions with residents in the "floating city" of Chong Khneas using a contextual approach. We categorize these exchanges into context recognition, context analysis, and context management. We focus additional analyses on four contextual environments (people-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered environments) to develop a cross-cultural practice framework. Our reflection supports two practice principles for social work practice: learning through human interactions and assessing with positivity.

Keywords: Chong Khneas, Cambodia; Tonle Sap Lake; Contextual Practice; Child Welfare; Observational Approach; International Social Work

Contextualizing Practice in Cambodia: A Hidden Living Place with Practice Insight

In 2013, the authors of this article, along with a group of study abroad students, journeyed to Cambodia on a trip that illuminated the importance of studying immigrant cultures from a contextual perspective. We gazed in awe the first time as we approached Chong Khneas and saw proof of the floating city's namesake: the land, heavy with lush trees and nearly suffocating humidity, really does float atop green, moss-colored water. As we digested the landscape surrounding us, our eyes darted between all the activities occurring at once –locals swam vigorously, napped lazily, began the afternoon's cooking, and initiated conversations of content we hoped to get translated. We found ourselves hoping that our time in the floating city would not be limited to watching, but would also allow us to learn from the people around us whose lives on the water were so different from our landlocked lifestyle at home. If we floated just above the water every day, would we get sea-sick? Would we stay healthy and clean? Would we or our loved ones be in danger of drowning? While we pondered the questions we could not yet ask of the locals, we noticed that their concern seemed incredibly minimal compared to our own.

Rich in history, Cambodia is home to many ancient temples, including Angkor Wat (a one-thousand-year-old temple discovered in the jungle), the Temple of Bayon (famous for having many carved faces), Ta Prohm (a Bayon style temple called Rajavihara), Silver Pagoda (inside Khmer Royal Palace), and temples of Khmer memorial landmarks called "the killing fields." The word "killing" apparently links to those who were killed during the Khmer Rouge massacre. As we entered these worship places, we couldn't believe but see countless skulls and human bones placed in gigantic viewing boxes. These religiously enriched places provided us with a setting to retreat, pray, observe history, and reflect on the country's recent wars. While visiting these sites, we discovered one location with a profound cultural history: the "floating city" of Chong Khneas, where we focused on the lives of immigrant families living on fishing boats. Although the villagers expressed a need for additional resources, they were also clear about their desire to be treated fairly, equitably, and respectfully. Based on our time-limited exposure to this unique culture, we were introduced to the history of the floating city and the hardships of the people currently living there. During and after this journey, we discussed the use of a contextual approach to develop culturally and ethnically relevant strategies in social service delivery with indigenous, migrant and immigrant populations. Through this narrative, we recalled residents' perceptions of positive changes in their environment to make recommendations for improving the daily quality of life in Chong Khneas. Although this narrative does not contain actual dialogue or conversational content that may have taken place, we aim to provide this population's voice through our observations about them.

CONTEXTUALIZING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Throughout and after this journey, we discussed their social service delivery needs with a contextual lens. We read from Allen-Meares and Garvin (2000) that contextualized social work practice is assessed using integrated social work practice skills that focus on educating through learning about power within one's living environment, identifying a collective process to determine practice strategies, and connecting "community, class, and culture" for effective practice strategy building (p.13). We interacted with local people using three contextualized assessment lenses: 1) context recognition, 2) context analysis, and 3) context management. *Context recognition*, a term common in research on nonverbal behaviors, uses historical or behavioral patterns as contextual information to help a person or a group of people recall memories about a place or situation (Morency, Lee, Sidner, & Darrell, 2005). In this study tour, we paid attention to the people of Chong Khneas as they described the history and memory of their cultural environment; they also provided a heartfelt connection to our contextualized assessment. *Context analysis*, a term derived from business research, is the process of scanning environmental information to discover changes that may affect people's lives and behaviors. Analyzing the context is considered a "situation analysis" in strategic planning to promote organizational effectiveness (Ward & Peppard, 2002, p.82). Learning from secondary sources prior to attending this experiential journey, we reflected upon the local people's relations to their own family and others, which helped identify risk and protective factors for children. *Context management*, a term generated from tourism studies, is a participatory process that aims to identify relational factors among the study targets through various means of interaction (Buján et al., 2013).

Although we used an observational approach to describe this environment, during this visit, we asked questions to ascertain how local people have used environmental support to manage their lives. These questions included: "What have you or your family done to obtain drinking water for the community?" "How do you obtain and maintain external resources?" "What is a memory about this place that you would like to pass on to your next generation?" "What would you expect your next generation do to support this community?" "What are the most helpful resources in your environment and where can these resources be found?" and "What kind of environmental changes have been helpful for this community?" These questions were generated from a central open-ended question asked among the social workers during the trip: *What cultural exchanges would we expect to observe and hear from the families and their community?*

Context Recognition: The Floating City

Based on the residents' description, we researched a website by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2013) which describes that heavy rainfall and flooding has rendered this area to be one of the most fish-abundant regions in the world. Residents see Chong Khneas as a small village that sits on Tonle Sap Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. The main tributary of the lake is the Tonle Sap River, which receives excess water from the Mekong River during the rainy season. Roshko (2011) describes this excess water reverses the direction of flow of Tonle Sap River and, as a consequence, leads to the inundation of 1.25 million acres of forest and agricultural land for several months each year. Residents live with lake resources as the surface area of the lake has grown more than quadruples, from 2,500 to 11,000 square kilometers, and its depth increases from one to ten meters. In recognition of its rich biodiversity the area was declared as a biosphere reserve in 1997. People in this area stated that they have been relying upon the abundance of fish and the agricultural richness of Tonle Sap Lake and the surrounding area for their livelihood for centuries. The Tonle Sap Lake has played a large role in shaping the country's cultural identity, its economic health, and the stability of the people in Chong Khneas for years. As reported by Mydan (2000) and Roshko (2011), the people living in the Tonle Sap area represent ethnically diverse groups such as Vietnamese boat people and local Khmers living in poverty. Their livelihood and economic state depend solely on the resources acquired from the lake.

Context Analysis: Past and Present of the Hidden People

We used information collected from the local population around the Tonle Sap Lake area to identify

the importance of understanding human diversity. We began with their historical development. According to local residents, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Tonle Sap Lake region was sparsely populated. The Khmers began to move onto the lake in order to fish toward the middle of the nineteenth century, settling in the area when the fishing season was most favorable and returning to their villages once they had harvested enough fish for their yearly consumption. Fishing was considered an easily learned occupation that required only a small initial financial investment since the nets and materials to catch the fish were affordable. Most fishermen caught what they needed each day to feed their families and traded the remainder of their daily catch for other sources of food, including rice. The presence of the Khmer on the lake became more prominent after 1979 when the Khmer Rouge disbanded. Today, many Khmers are still moving to the floating village of Chong Khneas. Tourism of Cambodia (2014) names this lake area "an important commercial resource" as it provides "more than half of the fish consumed in Cambodia" (webpage). Although we did not hear directly about the reasons for settling in Chong Khneas, we examined the literature later and found that they include lack of land, family disputes, poverty, lack of education and technical skills, and familiarity with the environment (Roshko, 2011). Khmer population accounts for the majority of an estimated 80,000 people living in floating villages around Tonle Sap Lake. Many immigrants have also settled there, including ethnic Siamese (Thai) and a large population of Vietnamese, but no formal statistics detail how many immigrant families previously or currently live in the villages. At a museum (on a boat) a local person told that the floating villagers were once farmers who lost their land during the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror and fled to the lake area in the 1970s. Some Vietnamese families who decided to stay in Cambodia no longer have family ties or connections in Vietnam.

We were told that lack of a formal education system on the floating city has contributed to poverty and the absence of opportunities for upward mobility. Residents rely heavily on fishing and natural resources to feed their families. For many residents in Chong Khneas, life on the water is a cultural tradition they cherish despite a lack of resources. According to our tour guide, many villagers we talked with about their living conditions are not there by choice. These residents like the floating city because it has natural resources, but they do not want to keep living there. Many prefer to live on land so that they would have access to clean water and sanitation. Their lack of financial resources may limit alternatives for them to "land" on the dry land of Chong Khneas since life on the river is what they know best.

Context Management: Reflecting the Experience of Poverty

Visual evidence told a story of high poverty in this floating city; families survived on low income from trade, fishing, museums, and other jobs that would be described as "blue-collar" in American culture. When we asked those around us about the death rates in Chong Khneas, we received no answers more informative than "We don't know." However, if there was any anxiety on their parts about catching some fatal, waterborne illness, they never expressed it. In fact, they did not seem anxious about any of the factors we saw as problematic through our Western lens: poor health, poverty, isolation. Rather, they smiled as they welcomed us wholeheartedly into their private environment. As they hopped out their boats easily and naturally, we saw their faces an expression of the pride they had in their primary mode of transportation and way of life.

In the floating city, most residents learn to accept poverty as part of their natural environment. According to recent data in Cambodia, being poor is defined as living under the national poverty line of US $0.93 per capita per day (Ministry of Planning, 2013). UNICEF (2015) estimated that approximately one third of Cambodians are living below the national poverty line. Without the support of census data on the floating villagers, we could only observe these families living with insufficient resources to meet their daily needs. Partially due to the degraded drinking-water sources, waterborne diseases represent a major public health issue in Cambodia. Preventable diseases such as diarrhea and respiratory infections are the leading cause of death in children, among whom 45 percent also suffered from malnutrition (UNICEF, 2015). Families with home-based water treatment systems and safe storage for their water are less likely to fall ill from waterborne pathogens. Our observations in this trip could only attest to some residents' concern

about their children's health condition. This information provides a description of the need for safe drinking water and for safe sanitation. In particular when we found that the Cambodian Red Cross was a first NGO to develop and implement a ceramic filter to provide local families with safe drinking water, we appreciated more of the clean water we have been drinking.

CONTEXTUALIZING FURTHER: ENVIRONMENT-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

As social workers, we utilized four "environments" as our contextual references when working with culturally different clients–in this case, with the people in an Asian country away from our homeland. Analyses of these environments expand our views so that we can learn from clients and families as they connect to their environment. Through this cultural learning, the following questions were generated.

People-centered environments: How do we use new information from our clients' surroundings to assess the situation?

Knowledge-centered environments: What are the missing links between the assessment and the expected solution?

Assessment-centered environments: What is the expected outcome and what can we do to achieve the goal set with and for the client? What do the clients see, feel, and think about the intervention process in the environment?

Community-centered environments: What kind of support do we need to help clients achieve the expected goal?

People-Centered Environments

We directly observed the villagers with our contextual analysis. Many make a living by fish farming, fishing on the river, and selling fruits and vegetables to their neighbors and local stores. In order to create a sustainable community, NGOs such as the Red Cross and the United Nations local office have helped this floating city host two schools, a community market, a general store, a Catholic church, a Buddhist temple, a healthcare clinic, and a basketball court with netting around the sides to keep the balls from falling into the water. The residents use long rowboats to access these floating buildings, and a solar-powered cell phone tower provides phone service to connect them to the outside world. Since they can use their private boats to take tourists up and down the river, we can get a glimpse into their life on Chong Khneas.

In recent years, the floating city of Chong Khneas has become a popular tourist destination. Tourism, along with the expansion of the garment, construction, and agricultural sectors, has had a positive impact on Cambodia. We felt that the villagers have been accustomed to tourists in boats photographing their daily lives. The boats, many of which do not contain indoor plumbing or electricity, have been converted into habitable homes for the families. During our river trip, women and children used their cultural adjustment skills to maximize the tourism business. Women rowed their tourism boats and sold goods while breastfeeding their babies. Many of these women covered their faces with scarves and large cone-shaped hats in an attempt to protect their skin from harsh winds and sun reflecting on the water. Children played alone in boats and on the side of the river.

While we were moving along the river in our motorized tour boat, a young girl around the age of six surprised us by suddenly jumping into our boat. Using non-verbal cues to gesture toward her product while repeating a chorus of "Cola! Cola!" the girl tried her best to sell us soda while we were still processing the shock of her sudden appearance. At first, we could not figure out where she came from or how she got into our boat since the driver had not stopped the boat during this encounter. We then saw that a woman had pulled a motorized row-boat alongside ours and was trying to sell soft drinks to tourists. When the girl noticed that we were still sipping leftover drinks from lunch, she swiftly leapt back into her own boat to pursue another more profitable audience, with skill a city person could hardly imagine. We reveled at the speed and efficiency with which the likely mother-daughter pair had worked as they peddled products of small value in order to turn necessary profit for survival.

These women were not the only females we saw working on the river. As we floated by many shops

and boats, the scenes we witnessed forced us to reassess our assumptions about the distribution of labor between genders. To our surprise, we frequently saw women tending to chores, selling goods, and cooking food for their families while their male counterparts dozed in shady hammocks nearby. Though some men were working, we did not expect to see such a sharp juxtaposition between actively busy women and napping men, which led to a discussion about the predominately matriarchal system in most Southeast Asian family cultures.

As our attention was drawn by the children, we witnessed how children, regardless of gender or age, sought money as soon as they spotted us-the tourists. Children as young as three and four years old would gesture and point toward us, clearly expecting money from the interaction. Our tour guide cautioned us to refrain from giving money and instead substitute food or items we might have carried over from the United States. When we presented the children with the only materials we had on hand, bottled water and pieces of fruit, their sullen facial expressions told us that these were not the donations they were hoping to receive. We later realized that the children typically did not value or understand the concept of clean, bottled water; rather, they viewed river water as a free and acceptable source of hydration, often taking gulps when they went swimming. Their goal of approaching tourists was to gain something they could not normally acquire on their own: money to freely spend on whatever they would choose. We focused on observing the locals' skills and strengths rather than their hardships in order to generate questions for reflection as related to cultural expectations. Using a strengths-based approach to focus on the positive aspects of their lives, our observations of interpersonal communication among the locals led us to discover three other types of environments.

Knowledge-Centered Environment

Child welfare is an undefined concept in this setting where children are learning skills for daily survival. We encountered a small boy around the age of four with a large snake around his neck who was trying to earn money by allowing tourists to take photographs with him, showing his courage with a seemingly dangerous reptile. Another young boy was lighting a cigarette and deeply inhaling it before handing it to his mother. In America, these public behaviors would have been considered highly unacceptable and perceived as child abuse and child labor. We could not believe that this mother was letting her child smoke; what was she thinking? Upon reevaluating our own perceptions, we realized with humility that mothers in the U.S. have little control over their children's risky behaviors, which placed us in a poor position to exercise judgment over this mother. In the floating city, these occurrences might be perceived as a normal part of life. We understood from our social work training that outsiders or tourists often make inaccurate assumptions about other cultures based on their own culture or law. Observing this environment first-hand helped us initiate discussions with locals about cultural expectations. We continued learning about their environment by asking additional questions about sources of education support, family entertainment, and environmental protection. Responses generally expressed a sense of pride in their land-water connection and ownership of their environment and culture.

Assessment-Centered Environments

Participants in this study abroad trip shared conflicting perspectives on how we, as outsiders, could study this unique culture. While some expressed that thorough assessment of a foreign culture is inherently impossible, others believed that we could serve ourselves and those with whom we spoke by simply asking for further explanations of those cultural concepts we failed to understand. For example, the residents' sense of time differed greatly from ours. They told us that they did not necessarily know what time they went to the ocean to fish and came back each day, but they simply sensed the right time from their experience, and sometimes insight. Upon their arrival home from fishing in the evening, they parked their boats in different places on the water each night depending on their arrival time. We struggled to comprehend their conceptualization of time, space, and order, but we found that asking questions often helped us move toward a better understanding as we increasingly envisioned what our own lives would look like if we lived on the water. This view was supported by an urge to understand between poverty and drinkable water. We found that their ceramic filters are annually replaced. With regular maintenance, the filter surface can be regenerated

through regular scrubbing and cleaning, which helps to reduce surface deposits and increases the effectiveness of the filtration process. Although regular cleaning is necessary, repeated cleaning will eventually wear away the filter surface. Filters can be made locally, which can lower the prices and provide jobs to the local community, but NGOs currently produce most pot-style ceramic filters around the globe. Although filters seem relatively inexpensive, they still might be financially infeasible for the local villagers who live in poverty to maintain their clean water source. Collaboration between villagers and local NGOs would produce optimal outcomes for the physical health and financial stability of Chong Khneas. We couldn't find a better solution than the resources they already possess.

Community-Centered Environments

The villagers' community-based attitude was the most prominent quality we noticed during our observation. In terms of financial resources, most people who live in the floating village of Chong Khneas are independent farmers or fisherman practicing agriculture with traditional methods that are typically less productive. World Bank (2015) states that two thirds of the country's 1.6 million rural households face seasonal food shortages each year; rice alone accounts for as much as 30 percent of household expenditures in Cambodia. Rural citizens of Cambodia also tend to have the lowest levels of education. Only 78 percent of adults in Cambodia above the age of 15 are literate. On this trip, we observed that people living on the lake area need healthcare access as well as other public services such as educational resources in order to maintain their quality of life. No voices seem to come directly from this community, but they need a place to gather because of their mobility on the water.

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOCUSING ON POSITIVITY

This experience invites additional discussions of practice which generated two principles of positivity. The first principle, learning through human interactions, relates to creating a rewarding social work experience through cultural interactions with indigenous and immigrant populations. We found it culturally rewarding to observe the children's smiling faces and happy demeanor despite their apparent lack of basic needs, such as clean clothes and water. The environment should be the starting point for enhancing child safety and promoting their learning while preserving traditional values and beliefs. Through our practice-oriented observations, we would like to promote cultural learning about this boat village. In a study of volunteerism in Cambodia, Koleth (2014) states that it is important to consider local people's "hopes" and "capacities" (p.681). For these local people, it is their hope to continue their indigenous practices and unite efforts to increase their capacities through expanding clean water supplies and maintaining the floating schools, the multifunction gathering place and the grocery market. Participating in cultural exchange through their local businesses conveyed the unique hope of these people.

We recorded many other observations in this journey to identify the next principle, assessing with positivity. We observed the use of both internal and external support among the villagers to examine connections between the self and others. For their well-being, they value additional community resources that improve their lives but also appreciate the resources nature provides for them. When receiving tourists into their floating homes, they appeared very positive and optimistic. The most common facial expression we saw during largely non-verbal communication was smiling; in shops and on the river, old and young villagers alike greeted us with wide grins spread across their faces to bridge the language barrier. When we would venture into local boat museums, workers conducted thorough tours using non-verbal gestures. As they showed us mounted fish representative of their daily meals and live animals found in their local ecosystem, the workers constantly smiled with pride in their way of life. This course, even as a single study trip, has integrated observations with social work practice principles and stimulated social work students' awareness and appreciation of learning from a different culture through observations and interactions. We commended local people's efforts to connect their environmental challenges to potentialities.

A limitation of this study-abroad course was the use of a time-limited approach to help us experience interactions with all aspects of practice, including individuals, families, groups, and the community. The

trip offered a culturally relevant example for us as social workers to discuss how to integrate both micro and macro perspectives into practice. In this course, we did not have sufficient time to learn the Khmer language or interact in the language locals prefer. We acknowledged that the villagers' culture is largely the result of hardships created from the necessity of surviving difficult weather and surroundings. Our appreciation is extended when we discussed topics related to the people we met, and we believe this type of cultural exchange should continue. While there were limitations, this time-intensive experiential trip has provided practice insight for a better understanding of our learning process. The first step to this contextualized approach is to assess clients from multiple lenses and within clients' contextual environments. We would use these observations to remind ourselves, while working with clients cross-culturally that we must 1) empower clients to utilize resources that could improve safety and health care, and 2) respect clients' decision to look for and maintain what has been working for them. As we recall the image of a group of young girls waving and saying something like "come again," we move toward closer participation within their culture, think cross- and trans-culturally, and venture outside our comfort zone with a contextual lens focusing on the positivity of humankind.

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