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Teaching Narrative Practice:

Introduction

By Cheryl White

Cheryl White developed and co-ordinates the *International Training Program: Narrative Approaches to Therapy and Community Work* which is based at Dulwich Centre. She is also the Editor of Dulwich Centre Publications.

In this journal issue, we are pleased to be publishing a range of practical narrative teaching exercises. This builds upon a long-standing interest in how narrative practices can be taught and learned. An early version of the *Dulwich Centre Newsletter* (1989/90) focused on 'Family therapy consultation and teaching' and this was then followed eleven years later by a special issue on 'Learning Narrative Therapy' (2001, Nos.3&4). As narrative practices then started to be taught in many different contexts and cultures, an issue of the *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* featured papers on 'Teaching and Supervision' (2002, No.4) from a wide range of countries. More recently, we have written about some of the challenges and possibilities associated with organising training programs in ways that are congruent with narrative practices (White & Denborough, 2005).

The collection included here offers something quite different. Here, for the first time, teachers from Russia, USA, Australia and Canada have shared some of the particular exercises which they use to engage therapists who wish to learn how to put narrative ideas into practice. We hope that readers will be able to try these exercises in their own contexts.

POSSIBILITIES AND DILEMMAS OF TEACHING THERAPY

The broader context of counselling/therapy training is an interesting one. There are a number of ways in which the teaching of therapy varies from teaching in other realms. There are many possibilities associated with this work. As therapy is concerned with ways of listening to and responding to the stories of others, teaching therapy often involves sharing stories about life and different ways of living it. Thanks to the innovations of the family therapy movement, the practices of therapy have now been taken out of closed rooms. There are opportunities through videotapes and live consultations for the intimate sharing of therapy conversations that once was not possible. This has brought a range of different engagements with ethical concerns and has made what was once a private professional domain now a context for creative transparency. Teachers of therapy also have the pleasure of working with people who wish to orientate their working lives to engaging with and reaching out to others in relation to difficulties they may be experiencing. This common ground of values and priorities can lead to the creation of vibrant and open-hearted learning communities.

At the same time, this area of teaching can offer its challenges. Phebe Sessions has described this beautifully in her paper, 'The art of teaching' (2002), in which she discusses the dilemmas involved in responding to social work students' experiences of past trauma and ways of distinguishing between the contexts of therapy and teaching therapy. Recently, within the International Training Program: Narrative approaches to therapy and community work, we have been exploring ways of clearly acknowledging that our responsibilities as a faculty are not only to those participating in the current program, but also to the 'clients' of these participants. One way in which we are doing this is by 'widening the focus of the round'.

WIDENING THE FOCUS OF THE ROUND

At the beginning of each International Training Program, there has traditionally been a 'round' in which participants speak of their hopes for what they may take away from the training. In our experience, sometimes these rounds have contributed to participants speaking of their work roles, their educational achievements, and some specific way that they hope the course will benefit them. Now we have re-organised these opening rounds. We ask instead for participants to speculate about what hopes their 'clients' might have for them in attending this training, and what hopes their 'clients' might have on how the training may influence the participants' practice.

Sometimes, within training programs organised by the Dulwich Centre Institute of Community Practice, participants also speak of the hopes that certain groups or communities may have in relation to their participation in the training. We also invite participants to make a written note of what they think their clients' hopes may be as this is something that they can then check with their clients at a later date.

What's more, if the program is running over some months, we ask participants at various intervals to gather feedback from their clients about whether they *have* noticed any differences since the training began, what they say about these changes, and to seek any further ideas that these 'clients' may have about issues that the training could focus on.

These processes provide regular opportunities for us all to reflect on our broader responsibilities. They remind us that the training programs we are participating in together are not solely for the benefit of those 'teachers' and 'students' present in the room, but also for those with whom we work back in our own contexts.

The realm of teaching and learning narrative practice is intriguing to us. There is so much to consider. We would be delighted to hear from other educators in the field of therapeutic practice about the pedagogical concerns with which you are engaged.

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Setting a context for training

By Alice Morgan, Maggie Carey, Shona Russell, Carolyn Markey and Sue Mann

Alice Morgan, Maggie Carey, Shona Russell, Carolyn Markey and Sue Mann developed the ideas described in this paper as members of the Narrative Teaching Partnership which offers a variety of training workshops in narrative therapy. They can be contacted c/o NarrativeTP@internode.on.net

This paper is intended to assist those who are training therapists in narrative approaches. It describes a set of guidelines which can be offered to participants in training workshops prior to undertaking structured exercises. Among other things, these guidelines clarify the difference between training contexts and therapeutic contexts, and the difference between using an exercise to demonstrate one's understanding of an idea or concept and using an exercise to practise and develop one's skills.

Keywords: narrative practice, narrative therapy, training exercises

In the training programs we offer, we are interested in enabling participants to understand narrative ideas and practices through experiencing these practices. We hope to scaffold people's learning in ways that contribute to the development of their therapeutic skills. Within workshops, one of the ways we do this is to provide participants with the opportunity to take part in structured exercises.

These exercises are based on either a particular idea of narrative therapy, such as the idea that stories shape our identity and actions, or on one or more of the maps of narrative practice. Our intention for these exercises is to provide people with an experience of what it is like to be asked narrative questions, and what it is like to ask narrative questions. We then provide opportunities for participants to link their learnings from the exercise to their own therapeutic work through asking questions such as:

- 'What does this have you thinking about in relation to work in your own context?'
- 'How might these practices fit with what you are hoping for in your work?' or,
- 'What interests you about the maps you have been exploring?'

The way we use these exercises and the way we introduce them varies according to the context, the workplace, and the culture of the participants. We do not assume that the same exercise fits for every cultural group or every teaching context in the same way.

The exercises all have a similar format. They describe a starting point for a conversation and then provide a sequence of questions for people to follow. We have found, however, that setting a context for training exercises is not as simple as giving people sheets of paper with the questions and then asking them to get into small groups to ask them of each other! There are some particular things that we need to discuss with people beforehand to prepare them for the experience they are about to embark upon. We spend some time with the training groups explaining the following issues, as outlined in the rest of this paper:

- Training is about practice, not a demonstration.
- Using 'pause' and 'start' during the training exercise.
- This is training not therapy.
- The outcome of the conversation is the responsibility of everyone involved in the exercises.
- Follow all the questions in the exercise.
- The trainer's role during the exercises.

THIS IS A PRACTICE, NOT A DEMONSTRATION

We encourage people to view the experience as a practice. Learning any new skill, whether it be learning to play a musical instrument or learning to be a narrative therapist, requires lots of practice. We would expect there to be times to pause, times to go back over and correct things, times of mistakes, smooth parts, and bumpy bits. Learning a new skill can feel uncomfortable, strange, or unfamiliar, and it's sometimes tempting to go back to 'old habits' or to the more familiar. We pre-empt all these sorts of experiences and ask participants to expect them.

We explain that this idea of 'exercise as practice' is different from using the exercises as a demonstration. The intention is not for participants to use the exercise to demonstrate that they have understood the idea or concept, nor to demonstrate one's competence as a therapist, nor to demonstrate that one is a 'good therapist'. We explain that this is not our intention for the exercises and, rather, we prefer people to use them as a tool to support their skill development.

We also encourage people when they are using these exercises to try things in different ways, to go back over and try parts again, to stop, start, and pause, as often as they find helpful.

USING 'PAUSE' AND 'START'

We have found pausing during the practice of the exercises to be really useful. We encourage the person who is interviewing to call 'pause' and 'start' as often as they like. We even ask them to imagine there is a pause button on the arm of their chair as a visual way of remembering they are involved in a practice of skill development not a demonstration or a therapeutic conversation.

We invite the interviewer to use 'pause' and 'start' as a valuable way of providing time to:

- Think about the questions they have just asked and the direction of the conversation.

- Enjoy the slower pace of the conversation without the 'pressure' of 'having to think of the next question or response'.
- Reflect on the effect of the questions on the interviewee.
- Separate from any of the discourses of learning that might be tricking them into thinking 'I have got to get it right' or 'I have to show them I can do this'.
- Consult the person being interviewed on their views on the conversation. This may involve asking 'How is this going?' or 'Is this making sense to you?'.
- Consider some other ways of asking the same sort of question or how they would ask the question in their own words.
- Consult the person being interviewed about a particular question. For example, they might ask 'Did that sound okay?' or 'What was that question like – what was useful or not so useful about it?'.
- Consider what the person has just said and how that fits with the following questions. For example, sometimes the person being interviewed may have, in their response, answered the next question. In this case, the participants can discuss how they could proceed[1].
- Consult the person being interviewed about their preference for particular questions. For example, they might say: 'If I asked you X, would that be better now? Why or why not?' Or: 'I was thinking of asking you X, how would that sound now?' Or: 'Is there something you'd really like me to ask at this point?'
- Retract a question and ask it again or in a different way.

We suggest to people that it is really important to be clear when the conversations are in 'pause' mode and when they have started again. We have found that it can be easy for these two modes to become blurred unless people specifically call 'start' in order to switch from the discussion of practice to return to the actual conversation using the questions provided in the exercise.

THIS IS TRAINING, NOT THERAPY

We have found that it's important for us to talk about the difference between being in a training context and being in a therapeutic context. There are some important distinctions to be made here.

In training, our focus is primarily on practice and skill development. Therefore the primary focus in the exercises is on the person asking the questions – the interviewer. This is very different from therapy where the primary focus is on the person being asked the questions – the interviewee.

This shift in focus has some important implications for people about to embark on an exercise. It means that the person who is being interviewed is asked to think carefully about what they choose to talk about in the conversation. Because the focus of the conversation is on the interviewer, and we encourage people to stop and start the conversations as much as they like, the interviewee is asked to choose something to talk about that is relatively small or minor in their life. It should be an issue that they are prepared to discuss knowing that the conversation is not therapy and may be unfinished, interrupted, and left incomplete. We suggest they choose something that is not causing them undue distress or concern in their life at present and is not a major issue from the past. We explain that the interviewee's role is not as a recipient of therapy but as an active contributor to the skill development and learning of the interviewer. This can be done in many ways. For instance, the interviewee gives feedback from time to time about their views on the questions and the conversation to help the interviewer with their understanding of how narrative questions work. The interviewee can also offer suggestions as to different ways of asking the same sort of question, or help to clarify points along the way.

This is not to say that the interviewee's experience of the exercises doesn't matter! It certainly does. People have told us that they have found it very valuable to be in the role of interviewee and to experience what it is like to engage in a conversation based on narrative ideas. This experience helps them in their work as therapists as it provides them a sense of how the questions sound and the journeys on which they take people.

THE OUTCOME OF THE CONVERSATION IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERYONE INVOLVED IN THE EXERCISES

Another important distinction between training and therapy is that the responsibility for the outcome of the conversation is different. In therapy, the responsibility for the outcome of conversation resides with the therapist. In training, however, we see this responsibility as shared between all the participants (including observers, outsider witnesses, back-up interviewers, and so on).

All people involved in the exercises are asked to watch for the possibility that the conversation may be shifting from training towards therapy. The person being interviewed has been asked to choose to talk about something that they feel safe with. Once the exercise begins, if the person being interviewed senses there is a question that may have a negative effect on them, or if answered would be difficult for them to leave behind in a good way, we ask them also to call 'pause'. Likewise, if any of the other participants notice this slip, they also have a responsibility to call 'pause'. This is how the responsibility for the outcome of the interview is shared.

When a pause is called by participants who think the exercise has gone off track there are a number of options:

- To stop the interview and finish there. The group may then discuss the skills that were practiced or what people noticed about the ways the questions were phrased.
- To discuss how to get the exercise back on track. This includes looking for other options or directions for the conversation that would be preferable and fit more with narrative practices.
- To consult one of the trainers to discuss how to connect the exercise back to the training context.

FOLLOW ALL THE QUESTIONS

The final matter that we clarify before starting an exercise is to encourage the interviewers to keep to the questions that are provided on the sheet of paper. At the same time, however, we suggest the interviewer makes the words their own, i.e. uses words and phrases that fit their particular work context. We like to explain that the exercises have been developed over some time in response to feedback from past participants in our workshops. We point out that if people are interested in experiencing a narrative conversation, the questions in the exercises will facilitate this. If, however, people choose to take a different track, to ask different sorts of questions, or to do things more their own way, then it is more likely for the conversation to end up somewhere further from the intentions of narrative practice.

We explain that these exercises are a way for people to begin to engage with narrative practices – they are like 'training wheels' to support learning that can be slowly removed as people become more familiar with the skills and ideas associated with narrative therapy. We also explain that the exercises are only one of many ways to engage with these practices. They are like a guide and a useful way for people to make a start. For all these reasons, we ask people to try to ask every question in the exercise, in the order in which they are provided (for an example of one such exercise and the questions provided, see 'How stories shape us' pp.40-43).

THE TRAINER'S ROLE DURING THE EXERCISES

The final preparation we give is to explain briefly our role while people are practising the exercises. We tell people that we will walk around the rooms while they are practising and are available to support people with the exercises.

POST-EXERCISE DISCUSSION

When the exercise has finished, we often make time to come together as a large group to have a discussion. This allows everyone to hear about the interviewers' experience of the exercise, and the interviewees' experience of the exercise. We ask participants what they noticed about the questions and responses, how the questions seemed, what surprised them or didn't surprise them and why. This post-exercise discussion also provides an opportunity to draw out any learnings or realisations that people came to during the exercise. We also discuss the implications and relevance of the exercise for participants' own work settings. Clarification and the teaching of specific concepts

might also seem a relevant direction for the training to take after people have experienced the exercise.

SUMMARY

Before embarking on the structured exercises we have developed for training contexts, we have found it important to introduce the exercises in particular ways. These guidelines assist people to focus on the development and practice of the many skills required to engage with narrative work. They also assist us as trainers to engage participants in an approach to learning that minimises the potential influence of the common ideas of having to perform and demonstrate ability before they have actually had a chance to develop and practice that skill. Setting the context in this way makes it clear that we are wanting to create a space where participants' meaning-making around their use of narrative practice is privileged over a sense of having to 'get it right'.

NOTE

1. Often in training people say 'oh, the interviewee just answered that' and move to a new question. If this happens, we encourage people to ask the question anyway and see what happens. People often reflect afterwards on how important it was to ask the question again, even if it seems as though the person has covered it already – something new or different emerged that was helpful, or a new way of expressing one's experience or meaning was discovered.

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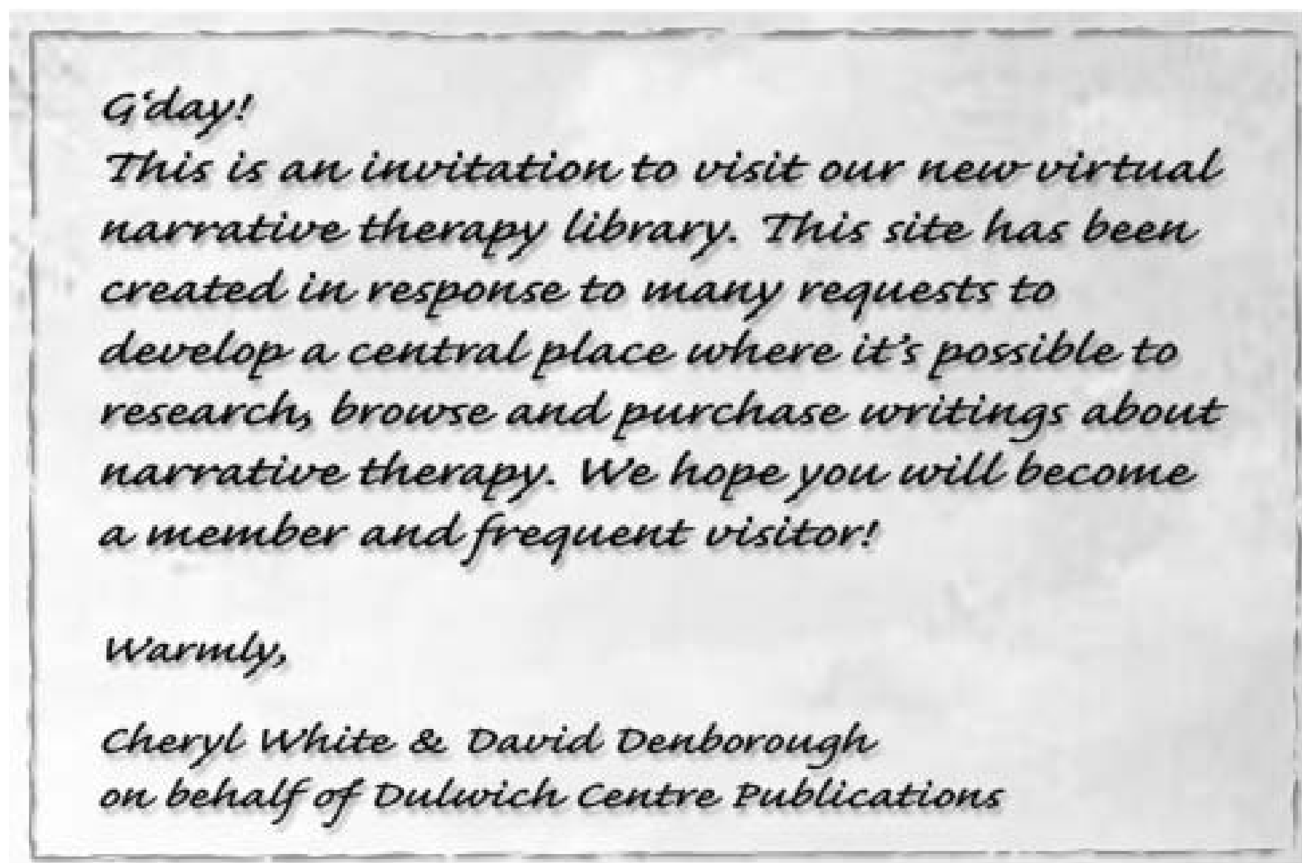

G'day!
This is an invitation to visit our new virtual narrative therapy library. This site has been created in response to many requests to develop a central place where it's possible to research, browse and purchase writings about narrative therapy. We hope you will become a member and frequent visitor!

Warmly,

Cheryl White & David Denborough
on behalf of Dulwich Centre Publications

Narrative Therapy Library Website

How stories shape us

By Alice Morgan, Maggie Carey, Shona Russell, Carolyn Markey and Sue Mann

Alice, Maggie, Shona, Carolyn and Sue developed the ideas described in this paper as members of the Narrative Teaching Partnership which offers a variety of training workshops in narrative therapy. They can be contacted c/o NarrativeTP@internode.on.net

This article outlines a training exercise that focuses on the storying of people's identity by asking a series of questions that situates experience in story. This exercise highlights the specific employment of the concept of story in narrative practice, rather than just a generalised use of 'telling stories'.

Keywords: narrative practice, narrative therapy, training exercises, story, identity

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'story' is central to narrative ideas, but narrative practice employs specific ideas about story – drawing on poststructuralist literary theory. While part of the appeal of the story metaphor is that stories are familiar to most people, this can also be an impediment to people who are first encountering how the idea of story is used in narrative practice. For example, we've heard some people say things like, 'If narrative is about people telling their stories, how is this different from any other therapeutic approach?' Or, 'Do people have to be good storytellers to get much out of this kind of therapy?' (or 'to be a good narrative therapist?'). We've even heard some people say that they already do narrative therapy with children, because they help children make illustrated picture books!

In this context, we thought it was important to develop an exercise that focuses on the particular meanings that the concept of story has in narrative therapy[1]. We decided to cast the exercise in a way in which students can understand the concept of story through accounts of their own lives and identity formation. This paper outlines the exercise and gives some comments on it from past participants[2].

BEGINNING THE EXERCISE

In this exercise, our preference is to not say too much beforehand! Rather, we have found it works well if people just try the exercise and then bring back their comments to the larger group for discussion. Assuming that we have already set an overall context for training[3], our instructions are brief. We might say, for instance:

> *We are now going to spend some time looking at the idea of story. In narrative therapy, the idea of story has very particular meanings and these have implications for the way we engage with narrative practices. In a moment, we will give you some questions to ask each other that we hope will demonstrate some of these key ideas. We encourage the interviewer to take a position of curiosity and interest in the development of the story and to use the suggested questions as a guide for the conversation. After you've all had a turn at responding to the questions, we will meet back as a large group and have a discussion about your experience of the exercise – for example, what you noticed about the way narrative therapy understands and uses stories, or what the exercise had you thinking about the significance of stories.*

We then distribute the exercise and ask people to go into pairs to complete it. As a guide, we suggest people take 20–30 minutes for each interview.

THE CONVERSATION

For the interviewee: *Think of a familiar or pleasing story that has been told about you more than a few times. It might for example be a story about your abilities as a worker, friend, community member, brother/sister, or your abilities in using humour, in sport or in music, or as a cook, for example.*

It could be a story about some personal qualities you have such as compassion, persistence, confidence, or risk-taking. It could be a story of how people see you, such as fun-loving or hard-working.

For the interviewer: *Explore with the person their experiences of this story. The following questions may support your curiosity.*

1. Can you tell me a bit about the story that you've chosen?
2. Why in particular did you choose this one? Why is it important to you? Does this story hold particular significance for you?
3. Do you remember when this story got started? What were some of the events that contributed to this story being told and taking shape?
4. Can you say something about the people who took part in telling this story? Describe them and say something about their connection with you.
5. What was it like for you to have this story told and retold? Has it contributed to your life in any way?
6. How did it fit or not fit with your view of yourself? Would you say this story fits or not with your view of your self? Why?

7. What difference has it made to have this story with you in your life? How has it contributed to or got in the way of things?
8. What has contributed to this story becoming less visible than it once was? Or, how is this story about you kept alive? Has this particular story about you continued or is it less influential than it once was? Have you played a part in this?
9. Do you have any ideas about the direction you would like this story to take in the future?
10. Just before we finish, can you say what this conversation has been like for you? Why is this?

DISCUSSION AND DRAWING OUT LEARNINGS

When each person has had an opportunity to be interviewed, we meet back as a large group to discuss the exercise. People often have a lot to say! We like to focus the discussion on their *understandings of stories* as a result of the conversations, and not on the *content* of the specific conversations as such. Here are some of the questions we use to facilitate this discussion, as well as a range of responses from workshop participants:

1) So what are your reflections generally on the idea of story?

- 'I heard a lot about the context of the person's story. This was really important because it made the significance of the story so much clearer. Hearing about the context meant that the story made lots of sense. I then got to hear the person's hopes. That was really important.'
- 'You needed to have a few events together to make a story. Just one thing on its own wouldn't have stuck, or would seem unrelated unless there were other events to fit with it as time passed.'
- 'I was really surprised about the effect of the story – how it has shaped what I do today. I had never considered that before.'
- 'Talking about this story in the past has helped me to see the future in a different way and what might be more possible now in light of it.'
- 'The story didn't seem such a big thing to start with, but then it was. Through the questions I realised how significant it has been in my life …'
- 'The questions opened the door to lots of other stories that were linked to this one – I had to really think and be specific. I noticed lots of other stories really quickly in the first few questions.'
- 'I was thinking about how power relations shape the stories we choose to tell – I would tell a different version of a story to my mum, or work colleague, or a doctor. So people choose different stories for different contexts.'
- 'I realised that these stories change over time – they are not fixed and there are always different versions. One story would never represent you entirely.'

2) What do you think contributed to this story being visible or available to you?

- 'Other people had to be involved. It's hard for a story to be kept going without other people.'
- 'Telling and re-telling the story is important to give it life.'
- 'You need to speak the story and have it heard by others for it to stay alive.'
- 'Hearing the story told through someone else keeps it going – for example, when you hear someone telling someone else the story about you.'
- 'It needs to be placed in a time frame – when it was really important in the past and how it is now and in the future.'

3) What do these ideas of story mean for your work?

- 'You can't just ask about one event in people's lives and think it's going to be a story. You need a few events linked together.'
- 'It is really important to have other people notice or recognise these stories – have an audience to them.'
- 'It was nice to be asked our opinions on the story – not presume it was all good or all bad.'

DRAWING OUT THE CONCEPT OF 'STORY' IN NARRATIVE

Based on the answers to the previous questions, we then work with the group to draw out some theoretical ideas about the concept of story in narrative practice. For example, the exercise often highlights the ideas that:

- our lives are multi-storied;
- no one story encapsulates experience;
- a range of stories are available to people: these may be described as dominant stories, alternative stories, and preferred stories;
- stories are shaped by history and culture;
- stories are events, in sequence, across time, according to a particular plot or theme;
- stories are shaping of life – they constitute our lives;
- the stories we have of our lives have effects;
- stories are supported or thickened by having audiences to them; so there can be tellings, re-tellings, and re-tellings of re-tellings (and so on) of stories.

SCAFFOLDING STUDENTS' LEARNING

Summarising these ideas with the group adds another layer of understanding. In a sense, this summarising is a meta-conversation, or something akin to a 'theoretical telling of a re-telling'. We began with the direct *experience of people's stories* in the interview, then elicited their *reflections about the idea of story* in these interviews, and we finish by asking them to *summarise these understandings*. In each step, we are therefore moving 'up the ladder' in students' reflexivity as well as in their theoretical understanding. However, each of these steps draws on their own experience, and their own knowledge. In this way, these 're-tellings' also mirror the idea of scaffolding conversations in narrative practice – the use of low, medium, and high-level distancing questions is here deployed in the three stages of the exercise.

We further build upon these ideas as our training program proceeds. We often refer directly to them when focussing on aspects of specific narrative practice, such as re-authoring conversations because returning to theoretical ideas about stories can help students develop their practice. After providing participants with this foundation about stories and the narrative metaphor, we notice people are then easily able to engage in an exploration of the micro-maps of narrative practice. Similarly, students have given us feedback saying it was important to explore the idea of stories first, so that the following skill development exercises made more sense.

NOTE

1. See Bruner (1986), Morgan (2000), White (1995), White & Epston (1990).
2. We would like to acknowledge the people who have attended our workshops and given their permission to use their comments in this piece.
3. Before any exercises are given we have found it helpful to make some important distinctions that will set a context for training. (see 'Setting a context for training' in this volume, pp.35-39.

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Introducing the 'narrative construal of reality' and the 'club of life'

by Alison Little, Lesley Hartman and Michael Ungar

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This paper outlines two exercises that were used to train a wide variety of staff members in a multi-service organisation for homeless young people. The training exercises present novel approaches to introducing the concepts of the narrative construal of reality, dominant and subordinate stories, re-membering conversations, and the idea of identity as made up of a 'club of life'.

Keywords: narrative practice, training, youth work, homelessness, re-membering conversations, unique outcomes, narrative construal of reality, club of life

The following two training exercise ideas were created as part of seven workshops held to stimulate conversations about using narrative therapy in a multi-service organisation for homeless young people, Phoenix Youth Programs (Hartman, Little & Ungar, in press).

Phoenix Youth Programs offers a continuum of care that includes emergency shelter, long-term residential care, health care, advocacy, school-based prevention, youth development, therapeutic recreation, career counselling, and therapy for individuals and their families. While we had experienced narrative ideas being helpful in the more 'traditional' therapeutic contexts, we were curious about their applicability for youth care professionals in the more community-based settings of our program. We wondered, what would narrative practices look like during the other '23 hours' (Trieschman, Brendtro & Whittaker, 1969) of service our organisation provides?

In developing this training, we were engaged by questions such as how might staff have narrative conversations with young people while assisting them in washing the dishes after supper, or doing other chores, in a group living situation? What does de-centred practice look like for case managers faced with a young person in crisis, when action needs to be taken? How can we assist staff in various roles throughout the workplace to open spaces for young people to develop subordinate storylines, who have totalising labels such as 'gang member', 'addict', or 'resistant to intervention'?

What follows is just a snapshot of two exercises we used to introduce narrative ideas across the whole organisation during a series of seven training workshops. While we won't give a detailed explanation of the different questions we used to frame these exercises – similar examples are given in the rest of this special issue of the *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* – we think that the general approach we use in these exercises offers something new to the realm of narrative therapy teaching and training.

INVESTIGATING NARRATIVE CONSTRUAL USING MOVIES

Movies are one way that we have found very useful to introduce various key concepts in narrative practice, such as what Jerome Bruner calls the 'narrative construal of reality' (Bruner, 1996), dominant and problem-saturated stories, alternative or subordinate stories, and unique outcomes (see Morgan, 2000; Ungar, 2001, 2006; White, 2007).

In this exercise, we showed workers from various sections of our program a segment of the movie *White Oleander* (Warner Brothers, 2002), which tells the story of a young woman who gets placed in a secure youth facility. The participants were asked to view the segment with an eye to events that might contribute to this young woman being labelled a 'difficult youth' by professionals, other young people, and even by herself. The group considered the labels she would likely carry, such as mentally ill, acting out, attention-seeking, crazy, bad, and borderline, eventually condensing them all into a totalising story of a 'problem youth'.

The participants were then shown the same movie segment, this time with the instructions to look for events where the young woman acted, seemed to be having thoughts, or experienced feelings that were at odds with this description of her as a 'problem youth'. The group was then asked to reach consensus on a possible new 'alternative identity' for this young woman. While it may be easy to understand how this viewing led to a different general outcome, the *specific* effects of such a simple exercise were very noticeable. People not only said they saw and heard different things that they missed the first time around, but also spoke in a way that was far more respectful and honouring of the young woman. Rather than her identity being collapsed as a 'problem youth', she was now a young woman whose life had a social, relational, and political context, and who responded to a range of challenging events with skills and knowledge. In reflecting on the exercise, participants said that they also noticed changes in their own body language, voice, and level of engagement when both viewing the movie clip and discussing it.

We were careful to be transparent about the limitations of this exercise in that it obviously didn't allow for any real interaction with this young woman and, because of this, our meaning and interpretation remained centred in our understanding of her life. The exercise did, however, provide a good example of how young people get assigned problem identities and how, with an

intentionally narrative practice, other possible identities can emerge.

RE-MEMBERING AND THE 'CLUB OF LIFE'

Re-membering practices are often related to the narrative concept of a 'club of life', or a group of people who are accorded 'honorary life membership' in clients' lives. Most re-membering conversations are usually only about one individual who is or was significant in the clients' life. Sometimes, these conversations might be about more than one person – say an elderly couple who lived next door, a family, or two best school friends. Over time, more re-membering conversations may expand this list to include other significant figures.

Whether one person or more, re-membering conversations are related to the concept of creating a 'club of life' of people who have contributed to, or might be supportive of, the subordinate storyline in someone's life. We wanted to create an exercise that not only gave a practice-based experience of a re-membering conversation, but at the same time evoked the concept of this 'club of life' more fully. To this end, we simply asked participants to break into pairs and have a re-membering conversation (using pre-prepared questions that we supplied) about not just one or two people, but about an *actual group*: an association, informal group of friends, team, or club that they had been a part of and that they felt had made a significantly positive contribution to their lives. In this way, the conversation evoked the presence of an existing 'ready made' 'club' of people who could simply and quickly have the history of their connection with the interviewee richly embroidered so that they became a 'club of life' *en masse*. We were cautious, however, to not exclude anyone by allowing participants who felt that they had not previously been part of a group to evoke a singular friend or significant person. In this way, they did not lose out on the opportunity to experience a re-membering conversation.

Another purpose in crafting the exercise in this way was to also help participants perceive a 'multi-voiced sense of identity', another key concept in narrative practice. In this way, one simple exercise conveyed three interrelated concepts at once: re-membering conversations, the 'club of life' metaphor, and identity as multi-voiced. Participants enjoyed this exercise, with one commenting it had the effect of 'bringing old friends into the room for a visit'.

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Exploring therapeutic assumptions and orientations

By Gretchen West, with Lynne Rosen and Charley Lang

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This paper outlines a training exercise which helps highlight how the background assumptions informing various approaches to therapeutic enquiry influence therapists' orientation and questions – with marked results. This exercise helps deconstruct and contextualise various assumptions through a hands-on exercise.

Keywords: narrative practice, narrative therapy, training, training exercises, deconstruction, therapeutic orientation

We created this exercise out of a belief that it's essential to deconstructive therapy and to recognise and really appreciate the shaping effects of assumptions we make in our work as therapists. The headings for each set of assumptions below may suggest areas of further fruitful study. We've sometimes spread the exercise over several meetings or lessons, with a different assumption to kick off each day. Depending on the number of participants, the exercise may also be done with people in a witnessing position (for example, in groups of three rather than just two), who can then discuss their experience of the interview when it's concluded.

ASSUMPTION EXERCISE

As therapists, to think about our work, formulate questions, and form relationships with our clients and colleagues, we are constantly making assumptions. We assume many things about the function of language, the nature of change, our roles as therapists, what our relationships with our clients should look like, how people and problems operate, and so on.

In order to be purposeful in our work, then, it becomes important to be aware of what assumptions we are holding, and how those assumptions are affecting us, our clients, our relationship with ourselves and one another, and of our shared and different senses of what's possible and important.

We designed the following exercise to notice and 'play' with the powerful, constitutive nature of assumptions. It goes like this:

You will each be paired with another – one person will be A throughout, the other will be B. A will interview B about a problem in B's life for 5–10 minutes, silently holding an assigned assumption in their head, allowing it to shape how they conduct the interview. B will respond to the interview, unaware of the assumption A has been using.

In Part 2, the process will be repeated, continuing the interview, but now A will be working with a different assumption.

When both sections of the interview have been completed, A and B will get to share with one another, and the rest of the group, their experience of the conversations:

- How did they feel in each sections about themselves, one another, their relationship?
- How did they each feel in relationship to the 'problem', – what felt possible or likely?
- How did they each feel in relationship to empowerment, to hope?

ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING ASSESSMENT

Part 1 assumption

In beginning therapy, it's important for a therapist to accurately assess and diagnose the client.

Part 2 assumption

In beginning therapy, it's important to be open and curious about how the client makes meaning of their experience.

ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING IDENTITY / LOCATION OF EXPERTISE

Part 1 assumption

A therapist's task is to find out who the client *really is,* and to nail down what's wrong with them.

Part 2 assumption

A therapist's task is to bring forward the client's knowledge of self, of the problem, and of their hopes, dreams, and intentions.

ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING PROBLEM LOCATION

Part 1 assumption

This person has a problem inside, and it's my job to identify it, and determine its cause.

Part 2 assumption

This person is struggling with a problem that is shaped by particular cultural ideas and beliefs, and it's my job to make the influence of these ideas and beliefs visible for the client to evaluate.

ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING MENTAL HEALTH

Part 1 assumption

As the therapist, it's my job to know what's wrong and tell the client how they could fix it.

Part 2 assumption

As the therapist, it's my job to stay curious about the client's knowledges, skills, and abilities.

The 'Hot Seat':

An exercise in narrative practice

By Philip Decter and Elizabeth Buckley

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This paper outlines a teaching exercise which facilitates student ability to generate narratively-informed questions for interviews with clients. This exercise provides a forum for collaborative learning, as well as gently introducing students to the role of the interviewer or therapist in a conversation informed by narrative practices.

Keywords: narrative practice, narrative therapy, training, training exercises, questioning

THE 'HOT SEAT'[1]

The 'Hot Seat' exercise is a revision of a more traditional role-play exercise that we have used in narrative therapy training settings. The purposes of this exercise are to assist students in learning concrete question / mapping skills, to generate an in-class experience of the multiple effects questions can have on conversations, and to add a level of intimacy to entry level and early training settings.

The exercise takes place with one interviewee who agrees to discuss a dilemma from their current work or life experience, a rotating series of students who briefly play the role of an interviewer, and the rest of the group who act as outside consultants / question developers during starts and stops in the interview.

SET-UP

Interviewee: We invite a volunteer to act as an interviewee. We then ask this interviewee to find a dilemma that is large enough to sustain a conversation for a significant period of time, but not so raw that they will be feeling uncomfortably vulnerable or unable to stop and start the interview for their classmates. Interviewees are also told they can do a 'Jillian-play' (named after a student in our class who originated this practice) where they use a dilemma from their real life, but can fictionalise any detail of the dilemma which they do not wish to reveal to the group. This provides some degree of anonymity and confidentiality for the interviewee since their classmates cannot determine what details are real and which details are added. Many students choose to speak only from their life experiences, but we have found that many are also grateful for the 'Jillian-play' option.

Interviewer: The class is then asked for volunteers to become an interviewer. Students often experience some fear or pressure in considering taking on this role. We are quick to inform them that the 'hot seat' is *the easiest* position in the exercise and requires *the least* amount of 'expertise'. In our version of this exercise, the interviewer in the 'hot seat' acts as a proxy/placeholder/scribe or secretary for the questions that are generated by the remaining students witnessing the interview. The interviewer will then present 3–4 of the questions generated by the classmates *for the interviewee to choose from.* Once the interviewee settles on a question they want to answer, the interview can proceed. The interviewer rotates out of the 'hot seat' every two to three turns in the conversation, and a new classmate is chosen.

Outside consultants/question developers: The rest of the group is then told they will act as 'outside consultants' or question developers. Their job is not to interpret, diagnose or otherwise provide expert opinions, but instead to listen, track the language of the interviewee as closely as possible, and to then generate as many questions as possible at each pause of the conversation. These questions frequently follow a map of narrative practice that we are working on in the class, such as the statement of position map, the failure conversations map, and so on.

Often in this process, students are hesitant to begin, but, as the exercise is repeated, we have found students become more knowledgeable and confident about their question asking. We have also found that, as we go around the room and more and more potential questions are offered, it is almost as if a mini outsider-witness group begins to take shape within and alongside the interview. This multitude of questions showcases the many and varied directions a conversation can go in, and the range of effects each question can have.

Instructor(s): Our job, outside of setting up the exercise, is to respond to the questions as the outside student consultants generate them. Before starting the exercise, we ask students to authorise us to do this. We tell our students that our intention in responding to them is not to be critical, or to create a sense of the 'one right question', but to invite a rigorous reflection and practice of the material, by offering 1) detailed feedback about the language / timing / sequence of the questions they are proposing, and 2) questions about their questions so that the students might increase their own understanding about the potential effects their questions have.

Detailed feedback might include proposing some small change in language, showing how a word or phrase could become externalised, or pointing out how a question either follows or seems out of sequence in a map we are working on. Here we might also point out when questions seem to be coming from internal state understandings or intentional state understandings.

Questions about their questions might include us

asking what intentions students have when asking a specific question, where they imagine their question might take the conversation, what part of the map the student is using, what they heard in the interviewee's speaking that inspires the question, how this questions reflects their own knowledge/skills, and so on.

EFFECTS OF THIS EXERCISE

Students who have done this exercise have told us this can be a remarkable learning experience. Students in the *interviewee's* role have told us they have been more open or vulnerable than they expected, and have seen directions that have been useful for them to consider.

Students in the *outside consultant* role have told us they felt more 'freed up' to ask questions as they are not in an interviewer role. They have also told us they are glad to have some immediate feedback and questions about their questions, although this can bring with it some challenges (covered below).

Students in the *interviewing* role have told us they have left this exercise with a sense they are 'carrying' their classmates with them in a new way, as if the class has become a re-membered audience for them to consult when they go back to their work and/or internships.

Finally, it has been our experience as instructors that this exercise helps facilitate a shared understanding of traditions, effects, and directionality of narrative maps and questions through a playful and shared learning experience. It also has helped to create a sense of intimacy in the classroom.

CHALLENGES / SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The biggest challenge we have found in using this exercise is in developing responses when structuralist questions or pathology-seeking questions begin to make up a larger proportion of the outside consultant student questions. We feel in these cases that we cannot let these questions stay unchallenged in the group, but find that repeated feedback can be experienced as criticism and can invite silence in the room.

At these times, we have reiterated that our intention is not to proliferate 'one right way' of thinking, but to help students craft narratively-inspired questions in skilful ways. We have also come to see a large proportion of structuralist questions as a sign that we should perhaps return to some didactic teaching, or more demonstrations before trying this exercise again. We are curious about what ways other teachers have found to respond to this phenomenon.

Furthermore, we have also found that it can be challenging for the interviewer in the 'hot seat' not to select out questions for the interviewee, or to take the interview in their own preferred directions. We have sometimes had to stop the exercise when the interviewer began to move ahead, and remind them that the purpose of the exercise is for the group to generate questions, and that their role is the scribe / secretary / placeholder, not interviewer in the traditional sense.

SUMMARY

This exercise has been one of the most useful that we have employed in our narrative therapy training. Previously, we had often struggled to find ways for students to practice question-asking in class in a manner where we can give them ongoing feedback in a group setting. Traditional dyad role-plays, especially early in students' learning, have the drawback of being susceptible to influential structuralist discourses that can take over students' interviewing. This exercise allows the class to generate many possible directions based on the maps of narrative practice, and to have those questions selected by the best judge of them – the interviewee. We love the way that this exercise allows for them to see the many different questions and directions that conversations can go in.

NOTE

[1] We developed this exercise following a workshop in Farmington, Maine, with Michael White in 2002. The exercise was influenced by Michael White's 'Failure conversations' exercise in Farmington, Maine, and by Sallyann Roth and David Epston's 'Interviewing the problem about the problematic relationship' exercise (Roth & Epston, 1996), and by many years of supervision with Sallyann, who started and stopped videotapes to generate questions! We are grateful to all.

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Deconstruction in the round

By Lynne Rosen, Gretchen West, and David Marsten

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This paper outlines a formal assignment that includes narratively-informed interview and deconstruction exercises and which introduces students to the externalising conversations map and outsider-witness conversations / definitional ceremony map. These exercises involve a range of pedagogic approaches, including class teaching, personal research and preparation, interviews, deconstructive conversations, and written reflections about what was learnt.

Keywords: narrative practice, narrative therapy, training, training exercises, deconstruction, therapeutic orientation, externalising, discourses, outsider-witness practices, definitional ceremony

We are not interested in solely 'depositing knowledge in students' heads', but instead in creating a context that supports students as they find their way into this work, bringing with them their local knowledges, experiences, and histories of trying to be helpful to other human beings. We think about students as co-researchers embarking on a process of discovery.

The intention of the following exercise is to give students and trainees the opportunity to more fully explore the interviewing process: students craft questions and have the opportunity to co-research the effects of questions; pay attention to what opens space and what closes down space in therapy conversation; and listen for discourses that contribute to keeping certain problems alive. One student reflected on her experience of this exercise:

> *Often in class I would hear Lynne say, 'you never know what question you have asked until you hear the answer', but it wasn't until this exercise that the idea hit me to the core. When crafting my questions in preparation for interviewing my classmate, I made every effort to review my readings, review my notes, and to reflect, all in the hopes of asking the 'right' questions, questions that I hoped would elicit a certain answer, provoke a certain thought, or in some way might empower the interviewee. I took close to two hours perfecting each question, trying to guess how the interviewee might react and where the interviewee might lead me. I believed I had stumbled across every possibility, but of course I was wrong. I had closed myself off to the possibilities. Thinking that I had explored every stone that I had turned had only hindered me instead of helping me. What happened next was something I had yet to experience. Whatever it is I had found – I call it 'openness' – flowed and felt right, and that is what I will take with me as I continue to trek upon this new-found path. 'Openness to possibility' is a lesson I learned and will keep with me throughout my therapeutic career.*

DECONSTRUCTION IN THE ROUND ASSIGNMENT:

Step 1: Form groups of three students. Schedule a one-hour meeting. Each member will identify and tell a brief story (five minutes) about a current or a retired problem. Students will work together to name the problem using externalising language. In preparation for the next meeting, you will decide who will be positioned as interviewer for each interviewee.

Step 2: On your own in preparation for your role as interviewer, craft six deconstructive questions for the interviewee you will interview at your next meeting:

- Map the effects of the problem (two questions).
- Expose discourses that support the problem (two questions).
- Research a hidden kernel of an alternative story. Optimally, these questions will emerge from openings that came forward in the initial telling of the story of the problem (two questions).

Step 3: Plan a meeting, either outside class or in class time (you will probably need to set aside 2 hours).

Come to the meeting prepared to occupy all three of the following positions. You will have one interviewer, one interviewee, and one reflector. You will rotate after each round.

Part 1 (5 minutes): The interviewer will pose the six questions they crafted for the designated interviewee. The interviewee will listen without responding to the questions. The interviewee will take notes regarding the effects of the questions. The reflector will also take notes about the effects of the questions, paying close attention to non-verbal cues from the interviewee.

Part 2 (5 minutes): The reflector will briefly interview the interviewee regarding their experience of each question posed by the interviewer. The reflector will use the following guidelines to ask the interviewee further questions. The interviewer will sit back and listen to the dialogue.

The reflector will consider the following guidelines while listening to the interview.

- What catches my interest or imagination? What impression did I form about what the client most values?

- What metaphors, images, or mental pictures took form for me as the interviewee spoke? What ideas do I have about the possible connection between these images and the persons' values, purposes, and intentions?
- How can I situate my responses in my own experiences and history? Where are my responses located in personal (lived) rather than academic interests?
- How might I express ways that witnessing the interview has moved me? Have I been transported to a place I haven't been and/or have I been moved emotionally?

Part 3 (5 minutes): The interviewee will choose a question that was most generative about which they would like to have further dialogue. The interviewee will say why the question is important to them. The interviewer will then interview the interviewee about this.

Part 4: The interviewee and the reflector will ask the interviewer questions about the interviewer's intentions in asking certain questions.

Students will repeat this process until everyone has occupied each position.

DECONSTRUCTION IN THE ROUND WRITTEN REFLECTIONS:

The following questions are intended to elicit your understanding of narrative theory and practice.

1. List the deconstructive questions you wrote for the interviewee.
2. Write a paragraph about what you learned about the effects of different kinds of questions. What makes certain questions generative?
3. Write a paragraph identifying the discourses related to the stories being told. Craft three questions you might ask to deconstruct societal or cultural discourses that were shaping the interviewee's problem.
4. Write a paragraph about any unique experiences, moments or initiatives that came forward during the interview process. Write three questions that would help you further enquire about these alternative experiences or stories.
5. Write about your experience of the process in relation to the following questions.
    - What surprised you about your experience? You may want to discuss your experience from the different positions of interviewer, interviewee, and reflector.
    - What was rewarding?
    - What did you learn?
    - What did you find most challenging?

Teaching theory and deconstruction

By Ekaterina Jorniak

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This article consists of two exercises. The first presents an approach to teaching narrative theory in conjunction with outsider-witness practices. The second enables students to explore in detail the idea of deconstruction, and to provide an experience of asking deconstructive questions.

Keywords: teaching narrative ideas, outsider-witnessing practices, active position of students, teaching deconstruction and deconstructive questions

TEACHING THEORETICAL MATERIAL WITH THE HELP OF WITNESSING PRACTICES

While teaching narrative ideas, I have often noticed that if students understand the philosophical assumptions that inform the ethics of the approach – which bring to life the idea of a collaborative therapeutic relationship – it is then much easier for them to learn particular techniques and invent good questions. The ideas of postmodernism, non-structuralism, and social constructionism are not always easy to understand, and passively listening to lengthy theoretical lecturers is not always effective! In my experience, students find it easier to get acquainted with new theories if they are active, and if they can look at abstract knowledge and ideas through the lens of personal experience.

This is why sometimes I combine teaching theory with outsider-witness practices. First, I tell the students about the outsider-witness approach within the frame of narrative therapy (White, 1995, 2000), and about the four stages of outsider-witness practice: expression, image, resonance, and katharsis (transport, movement, transition) (White, 2005). Then I ask them to take the roles of outsider witnesses while I teach a bit of theory – for example, about deconstruction or social constructionism. I then interview several students (only those who wish) as witnesses to what they have just heard. Here is an example of an interview after a short lecture about deconstruction in Derrida's works (Derrida, 1980).

Ekaterina: Please tell me what attracted your attention?

Student: I remembered the sentence where Derrida imagined the text to be not a peaceful homogenous unity, but a space of repression. And that the goal of deconstruction is to enhance the intratextual sources of opposition to the dictatorship of some 'main meaning'.

Ekaterina: What did this sentence trigger in your mind? What kind of image appeared?

Student: It *was* actually an image, a picture: during my childhood, I used to spend the summers at our country house, and there were wheat fields. From afar, they looked absolutely yellow, they swayed peacefully in the wind, quite homogenously. But actually, the fight against weeds was not very successful, because when you approached the field, you were able to see that there were lots of flowers amongst the wheat. When we were kids, we liked to explore this field; it was like an adventure, one could find almost anything in that field – a lonely boot, or a rake, and once we found a set of playing cards.

Ekaterina: Why did you recall that, what does it mean for you?

Student: It means opportunities. I have a very pleasant feeling now, that is connected to that childhood experience.
I remembered that one always has some opportunities; life is not monotonous like that field of wheat. One can be curious – there are different versions, possibilities … thanks to Derrida. [laughter]

Ekaterina: It touched you, but where did it bring you to?

Student: I would say 'where did it bring me from?' [laughter]; the last few weeks I have been overcome by apathy – I'd even say by existential depression.
I heard lots of energy, hope, and choice in the words of Derrida. I'm feeling it now, not fully of course, but I do.

Students' responses

Following such an interview, the students notice increasing motivation and interest, and a willingness to read more about the theories that they were learning about while practising outsider witnessing. They feel personal involvement and absorption – the time during the training just flies. The students also appreciate the opportunity to study two things at the same time: theory and outsider witnessing.

DECONSTRUCTION EXERCISE

The practice of deconstruction (White & Epston, 1990) is not always easy to understand. While some of my students have found it useful for 'unpacking' the ideas that influence people's lives, others have encountered difficulties in imagining people as separate from the ideas that influence them, and in believing in the practical possibility of creating space for reflection about these beliefs. The following exercise was created to explore in detail the idea of deconstruction, and to provide an experience of asking deconstructive questions.

Exercise:

The exercise consists of groups of three, with students assuming the roles of the Bearer of the Idea (or belief), the Idea (or belief) itself, and the Interviewer. The Interviewer talks for several minutes with the Bearer of the Idea and helps them to find a good name for it. After this, the Bearer listens, while the Interviewer has a conversation with the Idea.

In the first part of this conversation, the Idea tells its story, and the Interviewer asks deconstructive questions:

- when did the Idea emerge?
- was it present in all cultures in all time periods?
- who created it?
- whose interests did it serve during different times – what groups of people or what social institutes did it serve?
- what are its functions in society?
- when did it experience good times and when bad times?
- who are its social allies, and who are its rivals in the world of people, and in the world of ideas?

and so on …

In the second part of the conversation, the relationship of the Idea with this particular Bearer is explored. The Bearer still keeps silent and remains in the position of a listener. The Interviewer asks the Idea questions about:

1. The history of the relationship of the Idea with the Bearer: when did it meet them, how did the Bearer perceive the Idea at the beginning, how did the relationship evolve?
2. The Idea's influence in different contexts, that is, in which areas of life the Idea is dominating; what's the Bearer's life like when free from this Idea; what are its plans – is it planning to influence the entire life of the person; what tactics would it use for that; is the Idea active all day long, or does its influence depend on the surroundings and on the mood of the bearer; and so on.
3. The consequences of the influence of the Idea on the life of the Bearer, that is, what the existence of this idea in the life of this person leads to.
4. The relationship of this Idea with other practices, beliefs, and ideas that the Bearer holds dear.
5. The rhetoric the Idea uses to convince the bearer that it is very precious to the Bearer.

At the end of the exercise, all of the groups get together in a large circle and share their experience – Interviewers first, then the Ideas, then the Bearers. I explain to students that during the actual therapeutic process, similar questions are addressed to the client, while personification of the Idea does not take place, the result is the same as in this exercise.

Students' responses

The comments from the people who played the Ideas are often the most interesting. Students find that, in spite of content differences, all the Ideas are convinced that they are eternal, perfect, extremely helpful to everybody, and each Idea thinks that it is the only one. The Ideas experience real euphoria and completely ignore any information about their boundaries: they feel that they are great and important (much more important than people), they swell, and never doubt themselves. When the Interviewer asks them about times when they didn't exist, they do not understand what s/he is speaking about – this is not worth speaking about, it does not matter. They justify their own exceptional reasonableness and natural helpfulness for everything alive easily and with great enthusiasm.

The reactions of people who played Bearers of the Ideas are different. Some people say that they

liked the idea and wanted to embrace it, some people say that they wanted to strangle the Idea while it was pouring out its wisdom, some people started pondering whether they need this particular Idea, some people were surprised that they have been dealing with an Idea that was completely caught up in its egotism and selfishness, unfounded self-confidence, and total ignoring of logic. The Interviewers say that they start understanding better what kind of deconstructive questions could be asked and why, and also discuss the difficulties that arose with certain questions (see Freedman & Combs, 1996; Morgan, 2000, p.46; Winslade & Monk, 1999, p.26).

SUMMARY

This exercise allows students to perceive the difference between people and ideas, and facilitates an understanding that the goal of deconstruction is not to show people that the ideas influencing them are 'wrong', but to create space for a discussion of the role of these ideas in their life, and what kind of relationship people want with certain ideas.

CONCLUSION

Although the exercises in this piece are connected to different techniques of narrative conversations, they have something in common – the investigation of opportunities opened by a person's active position towards their life, be it studying narrative practices, or relationships with other ideas and social practices. During the first exercise, students stop being passive listeners. Their task is not just to 'take in and store' an existing knowledge, but to take part in actively creating and recreating of cultural meanings, and to interpret and re-interpret ideas through the lenses of their personal experience and knowledges. They try not just to hear and 'comprehend', but to correlate what they have heard with their own experience, which creates a space for reflection. In this regard, the second exercise complements with the first one, offering an opportunity to investigate other ways of moving to an active position towards one's life and choices.

As I consider this aspect of active positioning to be a key part of any narrative conversation, I try, while teaching, to make it a part of the learning process no matter which aspect of narrative theory, ethics, or practice we investigate. I believe it is important that students have opportunities to experience and investigate this 'transition' to an active position personally, to reflect on it, and to create their own unique attitudes to the option of being in an active position towards one's life.

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Learning narrative therapy within a graduate level course:

Teaching and exercises

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We are a professor (Jim) and an advanced doctoral student (Marcela) in a Master's and Doctoral Family Therapy program within Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA. Over the last few years, we have been able to incorporate a course on narrative therapy into a sequence of core courses in the doctoral program. This article focuses on two of the exercises we have developed for teaching students about the range of maps of narrative practice (White, 2007), and how these can interact and intersect. The first exercise has evolved to weave through all of the lecture presentations of material, and the other has been useful at the end of the course lectures, and later as a capstone to the course.

Keywords: narrative therapy, teaching

HUB OF THE WHEEL EXERCISE

In order to provide an anchor point for learning the various maps of narrative practice, we designed an in-class exercise which consists of a role-played interview with Jim as the 'therapist', Marcela as the 'client', and the students as witnesses to the interview 'behind the mirror'. This role-play is invoked during each of the classes that feature a particular map of narrative practice, so that a role-played conversation with the same 'therapist and client' can serve as an opportunity to explore and try out each different map during the course.

Rather than situating each of the exercises around different 'therapists' and 'clients' – and therefore a different issue or problem each time, we wanted the continuity of the same issue across the interviews. Keeping with the same 'client' but focussing on a specific map in each conversation, allows for students to see the different and often unexpected places that the various maps can lead – as well as how they relate to each other. Students have commented that this arrangement has helped immensely with their learning about the applicability and usefulness of the various maps.

In the exercise as we've used it to date, Jim has interviewed Marcela who role-played a girl who had been caught shoplifting. After a sequence of one or two questions by Jim and responses by Marcela, the interview was stopped and the class was asked for reflections about what they had observed:

- What questions did they hear being asked?
- What responses did they hear from Marcela?
- How did they hear the conversation unfold within the context of the narrative map?
- How did their personal and cultural contexts draw their attention towards or away from listening for and hearing different aspects of what had been said?

Students were invited to form teams composed of a 'question author', a 'map situator' who would locate the question on the map under consideration, a 'discourse monitor' who would check the question for unintended traces of discourse, and a 'structuralist checker' who would monitor language for unintended traces of structuralist thought. These groups were then invited to 'supervise' Jim from 'behind the mirror' by generating questions and lines of enquiry during the pauses between sets of questions. These were related to the maps that they had been assigned to read about and had discussed during the previous lecture. In this way, the students gained experience asking questions situated at different levels of each map, involving the same 'client' around the same 'problem'. As the course progressed, through the practice with each map, the story of the client became increasingly thick, rich, and multi-storied. In this way, students became interested not only in developing questions around each map, but began to develop a sense that the maps were different from *techniques*. Students experienced that maps could serve as guidelines for different ways to be curious and learn about different events and themes that emerged from the conversations.

SITUATED DECONSTRUCTION

The students' reflections also included discussions about what they had understood as witnesses to the conversation when they heard about 'shoplifting,' including the ways they understood this from their cultural, family and personal contexts. We were also able to enquire about what was *not* heard by the students in the conversation between the therapist and client due to these understandings about shoplifting. This often would entail re-visiting word-for-word the questions and answers in order to enable students to discover what had been missed, glossed over, or dismissed due to their frame of reference. This also set the table for discussions about ways in which their future questionings would be determined by what they had selected to hear, and what lines of enquiry were made impossible by what was dismissed or not heard.

Similarly, we asked students to reflect about what they guessed Jim might have been listening to about Marcela's story, and how her responses might have guided Jim from one question to another. Students also commented on the surprises or unpredictable knowledge that they discovered through asking questions based on deconstructive listening, and how this kind of enquiry led to unfolding into unfamiliar territories for the therapist as well as the client. We were then able to ask

students how they might have pursued future lines of enquiry based on other maps, and how different possible lines of enquiry differ in content and in assumptions.

For example, as part of the conversations with the 'shoplifter', each year the class suggested that it should be the responsibility of the therapist to engage with the client, and possibly the parent or school, around encouraging the stealing to stop, along with discovering what might have precipitated the misbehaviour. In the first year, the story evolved that Marcela had stolen clothing. In the second year, Marcela had stolen CDs. In each case this specific information had gone unheard, buried within the larger description of 'shoplifting'.

We invited the class to become curious about this dismissed information and encouraged them to craft questions that would move us closer to particulars and specifics about Marcela's experiences and what, if any, meaning she might attach to the items she had stolen. While each year this information seemed tangential at first to the students, who had difficulty seeing how this would lead to a reduction in the stealing, we persisted. Students then learned in the first year that Marcela stole clothing because she wanted to look good to her peers, which implied goals and values about her relations with others and her future. In the second year, we learned that Marcela had stolen CDs in an effort to use this music in her band, and this aspect of her story was later thickened around her goals and dreams about helping society. Through these conversations, consisting of a few questions, a few answers, and a deconstruction of what was heard, we were able to enquire about what was missed and what meaning could become understood. This enabled the students to have their first experience of thickening a thin story.

WORKING WITH DIFFERENT MAPS

Re-visiting this 'case' as the semester proceeded and as the different maps were presented in lectures, permitted explorations about what other questions could have been asked of Marcela. Working from a particular map, whether statement of position, externalising, re-authoring, re-membering, or failure, students also reflected about what they heard from Marcela. They were also able to pause the conversations and ask Marcela and Jim questions around the meaning they each attributed to different questions and how the questions affected Marcela's ways of thinking about herself, her actions, her beliefs, and her relationships with others.

In this way, re-visiting the case provided students with an opportunity to practice with one map at a time, around conversations with an individual whose story became increasingly thick with each exploration. The case became the hub of the wheel, and the various approaches to deconstructive listening and the maps acted as spokes, each radiating separately from the central hub of the case.

For example, when practicing the statement of position map, the students witnessed the movement of the conversation from what was known and familiar to Marcela about herself as a shoplifter, moving from descriptions about her 'antisocial behaviour', towards descriptions about 'fitting in' or 'benefiting society'. Beyond that, we were able to ask students about their own progression from what was known and familiar to them about shoplifters, to what was possible to know about Marcela. Marcela was initially defined as a 'shoplifter', an identity conclusion that, through the development of the conversation, the class learned fit poorly with who Marcela was and wanted to become.

In the second year, Jim worked with the students to develop enquiries using the statement of position map, through which the students were able to hear Marcela evaluate the 'shoplifting' practice as embedded within her dream to become the creative violin player that she wanted to be. This goal had led her to steal CDs from a store. While in response to evaluation questions that the students developed, she reported that this shoplifting was helpful, she also reported consequences that were getting in her way. Marcela also reflected about what these consequences were like for her parents and for her in her relationship with her parents, as she was appreciative of their efforts to be supportive of her and had a strong preference for times when their relationship was not strained by shoplifting. This was a surprising development for the students, since their earlier picture of Marcela as a 'shoplifter' had not included her relationship with music or her family.

This development was then pursued the following week in a class session which focused on the re-authoring conversation map. On this occasion, the conversation between Jim and Marcela was oriented towards landscape of identity and landscape of action questions across time. Through this conversation, the class participated in the development of a thicker story about Marcela's preferred identity as a musician. This was grounded from her early years playing violin, and across time towards her present passion for creating a music through which she wanted to spread a message to the world about freedom, by playing in concerts and through recorded music.

This conversation was continued in the following week's class, which focused on the re-membering map. Here the class learned about how this narrative practice allowed for Marcela's story to be thickened around her appreciation of a particular band whose music she respected and enjoyed, and from whom she learned about music as a way of 'spreading messages' of freedom. The class and Jim also explored with Marcela the ways in which her parents had been encouraging both of her music and her beliefs in freedom.

Discussions following each exercise offered a space for the students to talk about the shifts they experienced in their view of the client, as well as shifts in the lines of enquiry they might have pursued. We made particular note of surprises and aspects of Marcela's story that the students would have not have predicted from their earlier assumptions about Marcela. This led to conversations about ways in which they expressed their curiosity around these surprises through the different types of questions suggested by different maps.

THE VIRTUAL VIDEO MACHINE EXERCISE

The goal of this exercise is to provide students with an opportunity to practice and integrate their understandings about narrative assumptions and maps of practice, through an interview in which they are the interviewers rather than the witness to an interview, and with Jim serving as the interviewee.

In the 'virtual video machine', we proposed to the class that an imaginary video recorder was being used in an interview. When the interview was performed, the interview could, in imagination, be 'paused', discussed, 're-wound', and 'replayed' in whatever ways were useful, in much the same way that a replay of an actual recorded session might be paused, started, and reviewed. However, we had the luxury of doing this real time in the classroom by having the student interviewers and Jim as the interviewee agree to stop the interview as needed for questions and comments, as the interview progressed. In this way, students asked questions of Jim as the interviewee and heard his responses to those questions. Beyond this, by using stops, starts and rewinds, it was possible for the students to enquire and receive feedback from Jim about his thoughts and experiences in response to the questions, which ordinarily might go unexpressed. In order to have the exercise be as meaningful as possible, we believe it is important that the interview not be a role play, but rather, be a more 'experience-near' conversation drawing on the interviewee's actual life experiences.

Our approach to this interview differs from the usual 'pause' and 'play' options common to other practice interviews. We have found that the 'rewind' and 'replay' options really give students more flexibility in re-asking questions in different ways, attending to key information they may have missed, and asking entirely different questions. For example, students have the opportunity to ask one question, see what the answer might be, and then rewind and immediately ask a different type of question – and do this a number of times. This might mean they can test the categories of enquiry in any one map of narrative practice; they can also compare some of the various options for subordinate storyline development offered by the different maps. In some ways, then, this exercise is more like having 'DVD menu options', rather than just being a 'video machine'!

In deciding the content of the interview, we drew from David Epston's recent workshop presentations (2005) in which he interviews participants about triumphs in their lives rather than problems[1]. Incorporating this idea into the classroom, Jim has been the interviewee so that he could take responsibility for making the exercise 'actual' without edging into 'public therapy'[2]. Accordingly, we proposed to the class that they

could interview Jim about a triumph he has had in his life.

Initially, though the students universally expressed enthusiasm over the opportunity to interview their professor, interviewing Jim about a triumph in his life rather than a problem was confusing for them. In their experience, therapeutic interviews would typically start by talking about a client's problem and how to go about solving it. However, in this exercise, students were asked to assume a different position than one of a traditional therapist seeking to 'solve problems', and instead to use narrative forms of enquiry to learn about a story of triumph. Students questioned if, by inquiring about a triumph, they were expected to stay away from 'problem talk'. This provided us with an opportunity to clarify some conceptions about narrative as a practice that neither requires nor avoids 'problem talk', nor focuses on 'solving problems' as such.

However, while the area of enquiry in this exercise is one of triumph, even the problematic aspects of the story seemed 'appropriate', if not necessary, to discuss in a classroom context (most stories of triumph, at least the more interesting ones, contain an element of contrasting difficulty or elements that would not predict triumph). This contributed to making the conversation real and evocative for the students. Because these interviews can contain elements of both problem and triumph, we would caution others who might wish to adopt this exercise to take care of themselves in the selection of topic and the process of the conversation. At the same time, although this is ultimately a classroom exercise, Jim has come to discover different and unexpected understandings, which have also become an interesting part of the reflections around the interview process.

The interviewers were teams of two to three students, and all students participated in generating questions. The exercise began with each team of students generating a question they might like to pose to Jim. One of the teams was selected to air their question and the virtual video machine was declared to be on 'record'. The selected team then posed their question to Jim, who responded in an as honest and experience-near way as possible.

The selection of which team was going to air a question was not announced in advance. This meant that no team could predict when their question would be aired, and required each team to listen carefully to the responses of the interviewee following each question, and to be willing to discard a line of enquiry that they might have preferred in order to track the responses they heard from the interviewee. This typically caused some discomfort as interviewers were generally intensely interested in pursuing questions that were captivating of their own interests, or in following up their own first question with a second one, particularly after receiving feedback on the impact of their question!

In contrast, then, to the hub of the wheel exercise, this exercise allowed for students to draw on any of the maps of narrative practice, but meant that they would have be flexible and able to follow on from the client's response at any one time, which, in turn, followed a question asked by another group. We found this required students to be actively focused not only on their own understanding of the various maps of narrative practice and the common steps involved in these, but also acutely attending to what the client was saying.

In addition, after a direct response to a question, we were able to 'pause' the interview in order to have a more general discussion with the class about how the different lines of enquiry opened up or closed off new definitions of self, how they led Jim to become more or less engaged in the conversation to come, and to what extent lines of enquiry situated Jim in territories of the known and familiar as compared to opening up possibilities for what was possible to know[3].

During these two responses to the question – one a direct response to the question and the other a commentary on his internal reflections on the question, Jim made an effort to be conscious of several aspects of the conversation at once. Primarily, he was focused on the question itself and tried to respond in an as accurate and truthful way as possible. At the same time, while he was making this response, he would ask himself questions such as:

- What is my emotional response to this question?
- Does it connect me with a new experience?
- Does it direct me to familiar experiences?

- Do I feel engaged by the question?
- Do I sense that I am intrigued by the possibilities implicit in the questions?
- Do I feel judged or evaluated?
- Do I sense a shared curiosity between myself and the questioner?

These reflections would typically serve as the initiation point for discussions during the 'pause'. Extrapolating on David Epston's metaphor about practice games (2007), the role would be that of a 'player / coach' in a practice, both in the 'game' and evaluating the unfolding of the 'play' at the same time.

In response to this, students considered Jim's reflections, and then asked if they could 'back up' and 'rewind' so that they could pose another different question from the one they had posed. One of the virtues of the video machine is that, because it is imaginary, we can re-visit parts of the interview through our group recollections without the impediments of rewinding an actual tape. This part of the exercise has been useful in its own right. Students who generally consider themselves to be good listeners are often amazed at how different each of their recollections are of what was actually said, what words were or were not heard, and ways in which their preconceptions cause them to filter out or add words to what was asked or said. We can also explore ways in which their own interest in developing a theme might move them too rapidly into doing this, or even into a theme that is not of interest to the client.

After such reflections, we discuss different aspects of the students' experience of listening to the conversation, as well as in the crafting of the questions. One student commented; 'I find it difficult to work off of someone else's question, because once you have your own question to ask, there is the next question just waiting to be asked within that frame of thinking'. This opened up a discussion about how attractive it was for the therapists' teams to construct their questions centred on their own interests and curiosity but potentially distant from Jim's story, and what other opportunities might come available by listening differently to the responses to the questions. In one conversation, this led students to 'rewind' the entire virtual recording to Jim's first response and try a different second question to restart the inteview!

In this exercise, tracking and following each other's questions offered a possibility to reflect on the art and craft of a narrative enquiry. As they mentioned in their comments during and after the exercise, many students focused their attention on preparing their own lines of enquiry, centering the process on the therapist rather than tracking the responses of the interviewee. This tended to impede their listening for openings and traces of unique outcomes. After the exercise, one student reflected on the on-line message board:

> *We are certainly not asking questions to just get answers. We are asking questions to breathe life into a story. So it only makes sense that the act of questioning, answering a question, and listening carefully for places to thicken an answer, all happens in one conscious motion. It is a dance where questions and answers constantly feed into one another.*

Through this exercise, students reflected on the crafting of questions that might help to either thicken the problem-saturated story or the alternative story, and how these lines of enquiry were experienced by Jim as helping him to move from what was known and familiar to what was possible to know. Students also discussed consciously listening for openings about unique outcomes and how to craft the questions to expand on those openings.

In one interview, a question generated information that, for the interviewers, seemed a new development, but this was not so for Jim; it was an idea he had considered for some time. Had it been pursued through the interview, this information might have been interesting to the therapists but would not have directed Jim towards new areas of understanding. While this 'discrepancy' was discovered through the use of this exercise's 'pause' button, this raised the importance of checking in during an interview as an antidote to the therapist drawing assumptions centred on their own beliefs or interpretations. One student commented on the message board: 'I am learning of the importance of checking in with the client to make sure we are talking about useful areas, not just always assuming

that any one direction is better than another one to explore'.

SUMMARY

This course has been a 'work in progress' since its inception, and this continues to be the case. We try to incorporate into the course the feedback from the students that they provide in class, through their writings and on the message board, as well as using our own experiences in class to make additions and changes. For example, this year we are incorporating outsider-witness teams into the virtual video exercises. Next year, Marcela has expressed an interest in being interviewed on more experience-near matters rather than performing a role play during the 'hub of the wheel' exercises. Overall, we think that the course has developed more coherency as it has become increasingly centred around the two exercises we just described, and this seems to be supported by the students' summaries of their experience.

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NOTES

[1] Epston utilises a variety of questions in his exercise, including: Why are you so proud of the problem from the past that either disappeared, dissolved or you overcame somehow or other? Were there any occasions that you worried that you wouldn?t make it? Do you mind telling me about one of those times of doubt that didn't last long? What did you do then? What did you learn at that moment that was important for you to live for? (Epston, 2007).

[2] Epston utilises a metaphor of 'football training' in which 'practices prepare players for real games and introduce craft by iteration and commentary … stopping and starting … That is why practice / games are regularly interrupted by whistle stoppages.' (D. Epston, personal communication, April 26, 2007).

[3] Or to use Epston's term 'travelling to where the buses don't run' (which he has reworked from its use by the novelist / musician / politician Kinky Friedman) (personal communication, 2007).

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Reflecting on 'An invitation to address issues of privilege and dominance'

By Shawn Patrick

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Editor's Note

A few years ago, in response to a series of experiences we had within our training programs which illustrated to us the difficulty of speaking about issues of race, class, gender, sexual identity privilege and how these affect therapeutic practice, Salome Raheim, Cheryl White, David Denborough, Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese, Charles Waldegrave, Maggie Carey, Anita Franklin and Hugh Fox developed what has become known as 'the privilege project' (see Raheim et al). This project, which consists of a range of exercises to spark discussion about considerations of privilege, has subsequently had a considerable 'on-line life' and has been taken up in a range of different teaching contexts. Here we are pleased to include some reflections from one teacher about their engagement with this project. If you have not already read the full version of 'An invitation to narrative practitioners to address privilege and dominance', please see: http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/privilege.htm
The following reflections by Shawn Patrick on the use of the 'privilege project' in the classroom came about through email correspondence. With Shawn's permission we have reproduced her reflections here.

First, let me describe my class – I teach a graduate level Counseling Diverse Populations course. I've taught this course many times in the past and have always found conversations about privilege, oppression, or power to be very difficult for students. The topics are so emotionally-laden that many fear being perceived as racist or ignorant. Many also tend to display defensiveness as a result, which ultimately leads to short, superficial conversations. I have incorporated several elements into the class – discussion, projects, class activities, to try to help students gain different levels of understanding about these subjects. On an individual level I could see that people were learning, but to talk as a group was always difficult due to the above mentioned dynamics.

In the spring of this year, I took the privilege discussion from the website (Raheim et al) and divided it into nine parts. I had to do some editing of questions in order to apply to the U.S.A, but otherwise I kept the document as is. Each week the students were asked to consider the questions on their own and write out responses or answers. They would then email these answers to me a few days before class, and my graduate assistant and I would do a thematic analysis of the responses. We would then put the themes and relevant examples into another document and then shared this final document with the class. As a class, we would talk about the themes and responses. I should also add that, on these themes, no names were attached to the responses to try to preserve anonymity.

It seemed that in the first couple of weeks the students were concerned with answering the questions 'correctly', thus our class discussions centered more around breaking down social pressures to be 'right' or 'all-knowing'. Once the students got more used to the format though, they began writing what appeared to be more genuine responses. There were also a couple times in class where I asked the students to do the theme analysis (again with names removed) in class in groups. This activity turned out to be useful because they could hear reactions and thoughts related to reading various responses, and also the act of finding themes usually made them generate more ideas.

After completing the nine sections, students were then given a couple of weeks to write a final reflective paper reviewing all sections and then adding whatever else they felt relevant. In all honesty, I wasn't certain what to expect so placed very little expectations on them regarding paper content. What emerged included students' individual insights into their own experience of privilege. Most exciting to me was that many were talking not just about how they experienced someone enacting privilege over them, but how they themselves had used privilege. Also what seemed hopeful to me was how many had moved from discouragement over not knowing how to correct the problem to taking proactive steps to change the situation, not just for themselves but at a social and professional level.

There were a couple of particular moments which were significant to me. About mid-way through the process, one student approached me. He was worried because he had overheard other students talking about something he had written. For one of the questions he gave a response that seemed very critical of minorities and expressed a lot of anger about feeling 'blamed' for racism. When others read his statement, some seemed shocked or confused by the statement. However, no-one knew he was the student who wrote it. So when he came to me with his fears that he was being judged and criticised, I used this as a moment to process what those feelings meant to him and in some ways externalised his response. This became a pivotal moment for the student in being able to recognise his own 'internalised racism'. His later responses reflected this new insight and he described it as a life-changing event.

The section that dealt with examining ancestors also seemed to resonate with many. It seemed like being able to connect history to their present generated meaning for them around multiculturalism in general. Some also were struck by their lack of being able to identify ancestors, settlers, etc. That experience seemed to motivate them to explore their own ethnicity (in this case whiteness) and begin constructing identity around it.

These experiences stood out for me.

At the end of the semester I engaged the class in a general discussion about their experience of the privilege project. I believe they gave me honest feedback, and I'd been up front with them all semester about this being a new process for me as well and thus their observations of the process

would be most helpful in learning how to use this in the future. Everyone agreed that the privilege project was one of the most vital components in the class. They also said it helped to do a small part of it every week since it seemed to be a developmental process and not something they could just sit and figure out all at once. Many appreciated the anonymity of response because it helped them feel safe about sharing their thoughts. They also liked seeing the themes because many times they were surprised to see that others did think and feel the same way, and also surprised at the differences that came out.

On a personal note, getting to read responses every week also caused me to think and reflect. Sometimes I was surprised at my own reactions. But that gave me a moment to think about what it was that I was reacting to. The students' responses also evoked things in me that I would have to sort through. One example I remember was related to a question about solutions, and from my point of view it felt like the answers given were superficial or simply 'politically correct'. I remember using this as a point to challenge the class as to whether or not they would personally commit to such solutions, which led to a deeper discussion about responsibility, which then led to talking about one's actual capacity for action.

This Fall semester, I used the project again with some slight modifications. This time, the class took a more active role in identifying themes from each section. During theme analyses, the small groups would often generate more conversation beyond the assignment, and students began developing a sense of cohesion. At the end of the project, many expressed in the final section a desire to continue the work that had been started, but also a fear that once alone and outside of the group, that desire would wane. Students expressed how having the class work on this project together created a sense of solidarity and helped buffer against societal pressures to return to the status quo. Without this group, the students worried that they would give in to the demands to ignore race, privilege, and oppression. Thus we decided to create our own community of concern. All 18 students in the class stood in a circle, faced each other, and vowed to continue the work that had begun. As an extension of this promise, the class created a group on Facebook, allowing them to stay in touch and share stories related to personal experiences around privilege, racism, and/or oppression.

I will say that as a teacher I find the experience of using the project to be very uplifting! I think it generates a sense of hope that one doesn't always feel when discussing these topics.

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