

Different Ways of Knowing: An Overview of a Reflective Arts-Based Assignment

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Introduction

In the fall semester of 2015, third year social work students at an Atlantic University were given an assignment that would have them picking up scissors and paint brushes. They were tasked with creating an arts-based project related to a professional encounter they had experienced within their first practicum placements. The process created a space for students to experience a new way of learning with consideration to Heron's (1981) theory of extended epistemology and the four ways of knowing: experiential, propositional, presentational, and practical. Some students chose to reflect on interactions with service users, individuals, families, groups, local communities, or interdisciplinary teams, as an example of their experiential knowing. They were asked to focus on an encounter that involved significant power differences with the subject being an area of concern for themselves or those involved. Students then identified a range of factors in their chosen situation, including: the setting and environment; the social and emotional context; their varying perceptions and expectations; and the role of power. These factors connected the theory with the students' encounters in the field.

Upon reflection and identification of various factors, students created an original artifact representing their encounter in the form of a two-dimensional work, collage, or model, which included a title and a 400-word descriptive summary as representation of their presentational knowing. A final paper required students to further reflect and explore two broad themes represented in their artifact. As an example of practical knowing, students then presented their pieces to their classmates during a class exhibit, and exploratory discussions ensued. They shared their experiences about the process of creating their visual pieces, how it enhanced reflective practice and understanding of theory in praxis.

Students were invited to collaborate with their professor, Kathleen Sitter, and develop their pieces into publication form. A group of students responded to this invitation and expressed interest in developing and sharing their artifacts and stories. The following artistic compilations include students' experiences engaging in this artistic process, further enacting Heron's theory of extended epistemology that brings forth representation knowing through the artistic process, and is interconnected with experiential, propositional, and practical knowing.

In Heather Croke's artifact, titled *Be Like a Tree*, is an artistic expression of working with a population that experiences stigma. She also explores what it was like to experience oppression as a social worker trying to influence positive change in smaller communities while balancing the stigma enforced by the greater society. The concept of the tree visually represents the community from its strong trunk, deep roots and interconnected branches, as well as the vulnerabilities as demonstrated through its fallen leaves and thriving flowers. Jessica Ricketts piece, *Understanding Burdens and Developing Hope*, is a representation of the possibilities for

growth and happiness that are often suppressed by the many barriers in clients' lives. The hot air balloon with a basket is weighed down by rocks, serving as a metaphor of heavy burdens, while the clouds in the backdrop portray words of hope and happiness, as well as goals that seem unattainable to some due to societal barriers, mental illness, addiction and stigma.

Laura Moore's artistic artifact, *Compartments*, is an interactive piece representing an encounter with a service user at a sexual assault centre. Laura constructed two boxes, one representing a service user and the other representing their role as a service provider. Each box contained smaller boxes which could be opened and contained items Laura had crafted that represent coping skills and personal characteristics. Laura draws beautiful comparisons of how they had both experienced sexual violence, but were in very different stages of healing from their trauma. Carly Hutchings piece, *Loss*, represents the challenges involved in child protection work, specifically, the removal of a baby from their relatives. Carly created a quilt with various colours and patterns depicting emotions of happiness and contentment as well as sadness, loss and fear, with muted colours representing her feelings of mixed emotions in the center of the blanket.

My piece, titled *Power and Use of Self: Mixed Emotions and Thoughts in Multidisciplinary Work*, was a representation of a multidisciplinary team meeting I attended regarding a conflict that the team members were having with a client's psychiatrist who disagreed with their approach to the client's situation. I created a paper word collage and a painting on canvas that included the mix of emotions that I experienced regarding their conflict. In the center, was a painting of everyone who was sitting at the table showing the power differentials as depicted in their body size with me and the client having the least amount of power.

Experiences of the Process

Upon reflection of the entire project's process, students shared what they had gained from having completed a visual representation of their experiences, and their use of concepts and theories. Reflections were further enhanced by the class exhibit, discussion and accompanying research paper. The assignment provided me with a chance to express myself in a way that was different than the usual ways of teaching and learning in academia. Being a creative person, it also provided an opportunity to express myself through a medium with which I was most comfortable. I also found myself discussing its content with others more than I would have with a research paper, therefore allowing me to engage with the concepts more deeply by hearing others' perspectives. With consideration to how this assignment could be adapted, including different cohorts, allowing for multidisciplinary audiences or expanding the classroom exhibit to include a wider, non-academic audience in hopes of educating the public on social workers' roles could also be incorporated. Having an assignment such as this, at the end of the semester, could also allow for more breadth of experiences from which to draw upon over the course of the semester, where the exhibit would be a form of celebration of our accomplishments and learning throughout the term.

References

- Heron, J. (1981). Philosophical basis for a new paradigm. In P. Reason & J. Rowan (Eds.), *Human Inquiry, a sourcebook of new paradigm research*. Chichester: Wiley.