

From Planning to Spontaneity: A Lesson in Collaborative Training for Domestic Violence Workers

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In the state of Yucatan, Mexico, when an institution hires a professional to provide a training course, the institution expects that she will offer her knowledge and expertise including innovative techniques that can make its work more effective and efficient. This paper tells the story of one such engagement, in which the clients' expectations and our assumptions lead to unforeseen challenges, oversights and learnings. This helped us remember that with collaborative practices, it is always important to create a space for dialogue.

Background

We live and work in Merida, the capitol and largest city in the state. Yucatan is located in Southeast Mexico and is partly bordered by the Gulf of Mexico. The Mayan culture is native to the Yucatan Peninsula and neighboring Mexican states, as well as several Central American countries. The Mayans were noted for their wisdom; they excelled at sculpture and mural painting and developed a writing system based on glyphs that represented concepts, words or sounds. Furthermore, they have been acknowledged as unparalleled astronomers and mathematicians. Yucatan is composed of 106 municipalities, mostly very small rural impoverished villages. Even now, many remote municipalities preserve the tradition of communal housing shared by blood relations. Construction materials vary from stone to adobe and palm fronds, and many still sleep in hammocks. Although farming, handicrafts and textiles are the leading economic activities, migration to larger cities and the U.S. is becoming increasingly more frequent.

According to the National Survey of Family Dynamics, while 46.5% of Mexican women have experienced at least one violent incident in the past 12 months, the figure in Yucatan amounts to 37.19%. Based on statistics, the most common form of abuse in this State is emotional violence, followed by financial, physical and sexual violence. Approximately 30% of the population in the Yucatan is Mayan and considerable effort has been made to preserve the Mayan culture and language. The commercial, educational and health services systems are headquartered in Merida.

We teach at the Kanankil Institute, a postgraduate training center and masters program in family therapy. We are often requested to consult and train in various mental service agencies and government institutions. In 2007 the Institute for Gender Equality of the State of Yucatan (IEGY) invited us to provide staff training. IEGY is a government agency that is regulated by federal law, and whose purpose is to promote conditions that prevent discrimination and encourage gender equality. Every municipality in the state is required to have such a program.

In this article we narrate how we built a collaborative space and process for the training program that we

Abstract: *The efforts for including collaborative practices in a government institution of Yucatan, it showed us that still with our long history of commitment to and experience in working collaboratively in our training and in our clinical work, we allowed ourselves to get swept away in our pre-assumptions and what was familiar for us. Fortunately, we were able to catch the signals from the women and were to pause and “set aside our pre-assumptions and allow ourselves to “see” the women in front of us that they wanted us to see and to learn about their needs for training from them. We achieve a dynamic process that moved from the planning to the spontaneity and from spontaneity to a continuous search for options. We do not want to imply that we do not think that planning is not important. It is. What we want to emphasize is the importance of the plan as a starting point for building relationships and conversations that invite the others' input, their expertise and knowledge on the task at hand. We wish to illustrate a form of collaborative work, as well as the pitfalls and difficulties to be faced by this approach, and to highlight the importance of proceeding slowly and conscientiously, and to include the voice of others as soon as possible.*

Key Words: *Training, Family Violence, Mayan Women, Community*

conducted for IEGY. We describe the challenges that we encountered and what we learned from them, what we learned from the Community Promoters who participated in the training program, and furthermore what they said they gained from the training.

Our personal involvement in the process was determined and modified throughout this period. Dora was responsible for the initial contact with IEGY's coordinator, while Rocio acted as course facilitator. Both of us took part in program development, after-session talks, and the dialogue that ultimately led to this article.

First Contact

The Coordinator of IEGY's Training Department contacted us and requested a training course for the staff in the diverse municipalities and villages in the Yucatan: women who worked as Community Promoters. We wanted to learn more about the agency, its needs, and what the Coordinator hoped that the training would accomplish, so we requested a meeting with her at her office to which she readily agreed. In this meeting we learned about the agency and her expectations for the workshop. We also discussed the details of the focus of the training, who would be included in it, and the practical details of schedule, budget, and so forth. The Coordinator described the Community Promoters as

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residents of the various local areas in which they worked. She said they had diverse levels of education and had been trained by the IEGY on topics such as family violence and gender. The invitation to Kanankil was extended due to our relationship with the IEGY's coordinator, as she is completely aware of our work.

The IEGY has to expend federal resources by training their employees and social workers, then, our task is to provide them with better skills at the moment they work directly with the women at their municipality. The Coordinator's objective was in general terms to help the workers be able to make initial interventions in family violence crisis situations and to learn how to follow-up on their interventions to gather data for statistical reporting. The Coordinator requested that we prepare a very detailed proposal and in the formal format that was required by the IEGY and the government. This included details such as schedule, location of training, audio and visual equipment and materials that would be used, summaries and samples of the teaching materials, topics that would be covered, and literature that would be used.

Pre-assumptions

Who we were thinking about. After the meeting with the Coordinator and based on the information and the "pre-conceptions" that we formed from our meeting with her, we had several work sessions at Kanankil Institute to elaborate the proposal for the course, and to discuss the topics as well as how to conduct the training from a collaborative perspective. As we tried to imagine the women that we would be working with, we relied on the Coordinator's descriptions and our previous experiences working with family violence. We also relied on our experience in conducting training at similar community agencies that worked with family violence.

We had several pre-assumptions. First, we assumed that the women's education would range from completion of basic education to university education. Next, we assumed that they had some knowledge of themes such as violence and gender from their previous training offered by government training programs. Finally, we assumed that the participants would be familiar with the administrative process of the IEGY and the judicial process required by the government in violent situations.

What we were thinking. Because we work from a collaborative perspective in our teaching and therapy, we wanted the training program to be conducted collaboratively. We also wanted the participants to learn to work with family violence from a collaborative perspective. Over the last ten years, we and our students have been successful in working with family violence from this perspective in our own center and in community counseling programs. We discussed at length how to help the participants move away from the traditional practices in their work to more

collaborative ones. This would include how to introduce the workers to our language and how to create space for dialoging about collaborative practices and violence. We also discussed how to include the use of technology such as Power Point (the Coordinator's expectation) during the course and still have a dialogical process. It was deemed necessary to resort to learning technologies as government agencies believe them to be a show of professionalism. Thus, rather than mandatory requirements they are institutional expectations.

General Program

After several working sessions based on our pre-assumptions and previous experiences, we designed the program that we would present to the IEGY Coordinator, who then approved it. We proposed a 20 hour training program that would meet in four-hour sessions. Since there would be 40 people in the training, we proposed two groups of 20 people to maximize the opportunity for dialogue. We would meet with one group on Tuesdays and one group on Thursdays. We titled the training course "The Initial Interview in Violence Situations" and stated the main goal as "Develop basic interview skills such as listening, inquiring and interacting; learn the process of referring customers to institutions specialized in family violence; and keep statistical case records." The themes for the training included: (a) the interview process, (b) the role of the interviewer, (c) the interview in crisis situation, (d) the process of case channeling, and (e) institutional registration and follow-up.

We used the Spanish translated editions of *Conversation, Language and Possibilities: a Postmodern Approach to Therapy* (Anderson, 1996), *Therapy as Social Construction* (Gergen & McNamee, 1992), and *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (Gergen, 1997) as our basic texts. We worked diligently and carefully to create a brief synopsis (eight pages) of the major concepts presented in these texts, paying careful attention to the language that we used and to what we thought might be most relevant for their work. The Coordinator requested that we send her the literature synopsis and references that we would use, so that she could distribute it to participants ahead of time. So, we sent the synopsis and the references and eagerly looked forward to meeting and working with the women.

First Day of the Course

Change in calendar before we began. Due to participants' schedules and travel from their local areas to Merida, we were requested to change the meeting days from Tuesdays and Thursdays to Mondays and Wednesdays. This schedule change required that we change the persons whom we had designated to conduct the training.

Group formation. The first session with the first group presented a series of unexpected situations that required us to respond with a lot of patience and creativity. Though we had planned to have two groups of 20 persons each, on the first day some whom we expected did not arrive and several others arrived whom we did not expect. We learned that some had decided not to wait until their scheduled day but to "come and get it over with." Since we had arranged a meeting space to accommodate 20 people and many more than that arrived, we immediately had to re-organize our work space to accommodate the additional participants.

Schedule. The course was scheduled to begin at 9:00 a.m. The participants, however, did not start arriving until 9:30 a.m.; we greeted them and then they left to eat breakfast and then return. This was the most natural thing for them that they would have breakfast before beginning because for most the trip to Merida was a three hour car or bus ride. We did not get started until 10:45 a.m.

Group composition. From the Coordinator's description of the group, we imagined a group of women who, though diverse, would have similar levels of education and viewpoints regarding their work. As we began to learn about them, we realized that they were not only a diverse group, but radically different from the one we had imagined. This brought a series of very interesting challenges that we will detail below.

Education. We learned that most of the women had not completed a basic high school education. Thirty-four women (85%) had some elementary education or further education and 6 women (15%) had either completed high school or had some college education.

Language. Although in retrospect it may seem a little absurd that we did not anticipate it, at the time we did not consider language as an important factor in conducting the course. The Coordinator did not mention language nor did we think to ask about it. We eventually found that 12 of the women only spoke Spanish, 18 were totally bilingual (they spoke Mayan and Spanish), and ten were semi-bilingual (fluent in Mayan but not Spanish).

Introductions

We believe that personal contact with each member of a group is fundamental to the construction of a space conducive to collaborative relationships and conversation. We usually like to greet and welcome each person as they enter the room. The first day it was difficult to establish this contact early because the women were coming in, talking with each other, and then quickly leaving for breakfast. When we tried to talk with them, it was difficult because they were busy talking with each other. We soon realized that we did not understand most of what they were saying. Additionally, our work place was an auditorium and when they returned from breakfast they sat where they wanted to, scattered around the room. This is not unusual when you conduct a program for a few people in a large room. When most of them had entered the auditorium and in an effort to provide a closer first contact, we asked them to sit in the front rows, while the facilitator, Rocio Chaveste, left the stage and settled closer to them.

Once the group had gathered, Rocio formally welcomed them. She gave a brief introduction of herself, talking about where she worked and what she did in her daily work. She then asked the women if they would introduce themselves telling their name, where they came from, and what they did at their job.

The first woman to introduce herself was Martha: "I'm Martha and I come to learn how to tell the women how to not be afraid of the peace judge." Rocio thanked her and asked her if she could elaborate on what she said and also tell where she comes from and what she does in her job. Martha repeated what she had first said: "I'm Martha and I come to learn how to tell the women how to not be afraid of the peace judge." Martha's repeated response caused Rocio to start having doubts in her head: "Am I being clear in the way that I'm asking the questions about her and her job?"

the handouts were alien and had no meaning for the women Once again, Rocio thanked her for participating and asked Martha to explain her work. Rocio responded with curiosity to each thing Martha said about her work. By asking one question at a time in everyday language, Rocio engaged with Martha and allowed Martha to talk about her daily activities in the way she preferred.

During the introductions, the group seemed to be curiously looking at the handouts, the literature synopsis that they had received ahead of time. They talked amongst themselves in Mayan and of course Rocio did not understand since she does not speak Mayan. So, curiously, referring to the handout, she asked them: "What is it that gets your attention so much? Do you want to ask something?" One of them answered with the question: What is Postmodernity? Other women went on talking between them, nervously moving their hands as if discussing something in Mayan. The initial query was followed by others on the meaning of words printed in the material. Those words started to stand out for Rocio like "alert" notices: the handouts were alien and had no meaning for the women.

After the Introductions

In many ways, from the very beginning Rocio realized that she was going to have to make a shift in her plans and in her position with the group. Although she had not even gotten to the content of the training, there were already too many unexpected responses. The mood, the questions about the meaning of words, heated talks in Mayan and expressions of astonishment and doubt, forced Rocio to question the agenda for the day and the remainder of the course. Rocio's inner talk circled around several questions: How do I establish contact with their ideas? What do the

participants expect from this course and from the facilitator? How do I talk about collaborative ideas to a group with interests and languages so different that ours? Is the reference literature going to be of any use? What can be done about the work? Is this right place to relate in?

Rocio had already begun with our Power Point, using it in the introductions, but she decided to turn off the computer and disregard the handouts. Instead, we needed to simply sit down and talk with Martha and the other participants about what they wanted to talk about, their doubts and interests. We needed to learn about the situations they meet in their work and what they thought that they needed help with. In conversation with the participants we developed new goals for the training session that day and new themes that they wanted to explore.

End of the First Day of the Course

Towards the end of the first day Rocio and the participants had agreed on the way we would work together and decided to move to a smaller room where we could be closer and face each other. We decided to take up a new training agenda that was based on their experiences, the difficulties they faced in their work, and the problems created by the physical conditions of their working places. (We will address this latter below.)

What the participants wanted to discuss: Their experiences. The participants talked about their experiences of working with women involved in violent relationships, particularly the things that they did in their work with these women and some of the consequences of it. Some examples were:

“We have done things with people that live with violence; we have created groups to give them training courses, such as cooking and dressmaking.”

“We accompany the women to Merida or to the head municipality so that they won’t feel like they’re alone.”

“Working against violence has brought a great deal of problems to my home and with the neighbors, because they call me a gossip.”

What the participants wanted to discuss: Their working conditions. The participants were also very concerned about the physical conditions of their work spaces. They told us that, despite the emphasis the IEGY had placed on importance of confidentiality to protect the women; the physical conditions in which they worked in the municipalities did not provide such “intimacy.” We learned that, for the most part, they did not have designated offices or work areas where they met with their clients and that most of the time the meetings took place in public, open areas. They often met their clients on a patio of a public building or in a park where they said that “the town’s people can see and hear.” Some of the women had a table and a chair in a space they shared with three or four people who worked in different service areas (e.g., unrelated to equality, gender and family violence).

Continuing Challenges

From the first day, we continued to build relationships with the participants, to learn more about them, their work and their needs, and to question ourselves and them about the necessary next steps to make the course a success. So, at the beginning of each day of the course we started fresh: we discussed and arrived at new agreements with the participants about what was important for them to focus on, what questions they wanted to address and how we should organized the time together. New challenges emerged at each session that had to be resolved; we mention some the most meaningful ones below.

Changing group membership. As with the first training day, on each day thereafter the group composition was a surprise; it was never the same. There were always variations and it was totally unpredictable how many or who would attend each session. The women came to the training “as they could,” meaning that they came according to their work activities and as their availability allowed them. We did not label them for this behavior or think of it as a negative

characteristic of “their culture.” Instead, we accepted it and accommodated to it. We decided that if we wanted to be helpful to them we had to meet them as they preferred to meet us; in other words it was more important to be helpful to them than to try to get them to accommodate to “our culture.”

Changing agendas. We tried at the end of each session to plan, with the participants, to develop the agenda for the next one. However, we quickly found that the agenda agreed upon by one group would not be acceptable at the next meeting. This was not only because the membership of the group shifted, but also due to the fact that the pressing problems and the new crises of their work were always different. We had to verify and refine the agenda at the beginning of each session to make sure that it fit with that group composition’s needs that day.

What we realized was that the content of the training agenda was not as important as the learning process. That is, we privileged and emphasized the practice-experience above theory. Instead of offering didactic material, most of the time the work was done in small groups. This allowed us to learn more of the details of how the participants did their work. It allowed us to engage them in conversations with us and each other around their work. We also did a lot of role playing about the everyday situations that they faced; we promoted talking and reflecting. We discovered that they had a great deal of expertise and skills among them and that they were fairly successful in their work as Community Promoters. We helped them to identify the expertise and skills that they had learned to use in their work. We helped them learn from each other’s experiences and to reinforce and help each other expand on their competencies. We also helped them develop an awareness of their own attitudes and values that sometimes got them into trouble, meaning participating in creating resistant clients and being unsuccessful in their attempts to be helpful.

The Language Challenge

The most meaningful dilemma we had to face was related to language. Even though from day one its importance was evident, its evidence was highlighted when we realized that we were using words and concepts that did not exist in the Mayan language. Bilingual (Mayan-Spanish) women played a key part in group communications, since they helped explain the meaning of many words. Their interventions bridged the chasm of two different cultural perceptions of the world.

Concepts pertaining to gender and violence. Through their work at IEGY, the Community Promoters are well-versed in discussing violence. In order to communicate with their target communities, they have developed explanations, rather than literal Mayan translations, for concepts pertaining to gender and domestic violence. For example, the word “violence” does not exist in the Maya language. To refer to what we named violence, the Community Promoters used the Mayan word *loobilta’al* which has various meanings, among them are damage, diseased, something bad happening, and evil. To refer to women the word *ko’olelo’ob* is added which could mean women, ladies, or midwives. To say violence against women in Maya they use the phrase *loobilta’al ko’olelo’ob*. Sometimes they also use the word *to’opol* which means to hit, and say *to’opol ko’olelo’ob* to mean hitting women.

We found that it was very complicated to refer in Mayan language to a concept of violence that differs from our professional connotation. The Community Promoters used Mayan words whose meaning is close - but not exactly the same - to our professional concept of violence in Spanish, these are familiar words for us but they are foreign words and concepts in the Mayan language and culture. The Promoters had to find understandable and related terms in Maya to explain psychological, sexual and economical violence to their clients.

The Mayan language portrays the complexity of worldviews that characterizes its people. Multiple and even opposed meanings emphasize translation obstacles in a language whose grammatical structure is characterized by lack of gender and a phonology of glottic consonants that differentiate between identical words. Although currently written in Western lettering, pre-Columbian Mayan used a complex glyph writing system.

Language being a cultural reflection, it is easy to understand why many of the words and meanings of the Spanish language are completely unknown in the Mayan culture. The nonexistence of the word violence ended up being a gift

for us. We had to leave our pre-conceived meanings, biases, and cultural values behind and learn about the meanings that the life situations that the women were working with had for them and their clients.

Translation challenges in the Mayan communities. We mentioned above that some of the women were semi-bilingual (Mayan/Spanish) and that some only spoke Mayan or Spanish. In their local towns and villages, most people and many who seek help at the IEGY support centers only speak Mayan. The workers who were semi-fluent in Mayan and those who only spoke Spanish talked about the problems they encountered when trying to work with the woman clients who only spoke Mayan. In one training session they illustrated this in a role play, which is described below.

A woman comes to the help center of her community to solicit assistance. She speaks only Mayan. When she arrives the interviewer who receives her and who will listen and talk with her is a woman who speaks only Spanish. The interviewer grasps the limitations of language if she is to be helpful and solicits translation help from another woman in the center who is bilingual. The interviewer, who has not told the client why she called the other woman to join them, starts asking questions in Spanish which the translator translates to the client. Immediately, the client asks, “why does this woman come?” The interviewer explains to her that the woman is the translator, who is going to help them communicate better with each other. The client claims that the translator has no business being there since the one she came to see is the one who leads the interview; it is she who will help. When the interviewer tries to explain that the translator is necessary so that they will be able to understand each other better and so that she can be able to help her, the client insists that then she will only speak to the translator since she can understand, and that the interviewer has no business being there since she can’t understand. The client felt that if the interviewer can’t understand, she can’t help. She was adamant that she has no reason to talk about her life to so many people.

This role play situation put the theme of language back on the agenda, opening the door for an extended conversation with and among the participants regarding the importance of being alert not only to the content of the conversations but how the conversations were going to take place, how their clients could have input into this, and importantly, how in the world were they going to try to understand each other.

Participants’ Experiences and Feedback

When the training course was over we talked to the participants about their learning and experiences. We wanted to get their feedback about the benefits of the course and suggestions for its improvement. Here are some of their comments about what they learned:

(a) “Be patient and learn how to listen,” (b) “Give time and space for the ladies to trust us,” (c) “Learn to stop my fury with the women,” (d) “Learn that the women do not always wish to speak... and that at times you need only to listen,” (e) “The manner in which things develop is decided by them, not us,” (f) “I only know that the women of Tixkokob will be better attended,” (g) “When we speak with each other about our experiences we support each other,” (h) “I liked the workshop very much, the way we worked was based on what is real,” (i) “We learned the important points of interviews, what we can do when a rape case is presented to us, a couple and a man with a history of violence,” and (j) “I now feel more confident when conducting an interview.”

Discussion

Reflective Comments

We presented our experience and what we learned from this course in a workshop at the Pre-International Summer Institute (Pre-ISI) in Playa del Carmen, Mexico in June 2007. Preparing for the workshop and engaging in discussions with those who attended it allowed us to widen our perspectives about building spaces for collaborative relationships and processes. During a presentation at the Pre-ISI, Harlene Anderson talked about flexibility as one of the basic features of collaboration: the importance of responding to what occurs in the moment, practices guided by spontaneity rather than chained by fore-structure, and of the value of the word “with.” She emphasized trust and respect for the

people and the process that they prefer. These ideas synthesized and described our experiences in the IEGY training project. We do not want to imply that we think that planning is not important. It is. What we want to emphasize is the importance of the plan as a starting point for building relationships and conversations that invite the others' input, their expertise and knowledge on the task at hand. We wish with this paper to illustrate a form of collaborative work, as well as the pitfalls and difficulties to be faced by this approach. We hope that we have highlighted the importance of proceeding slowly and conscientiously, and including the voice of others as soon as possible.

From our initial oversights we learned that flexibility is an indispensable element in responding to the unexpected situations that confronted us and challenged our own pre-assumptions about the training. Having flexibility to move "with" the participants allowed us to break the mindset that we had fallen into: that the group had to fit the training program which we had so meticulously designed. It also helped us challenge the position of the expert professional who trains others. Finally, having flexibility also offered us the opportunity to remember that the client in the expert (Anderson, 1997).

What we Learned

We learned that it was important to respond to and be coherent with what occurs in the moment. Given the events in the first few minutes of the course, with the comings and goings, with the introductions, with the planned presentation, and with the responses to the literature, we could not ignore the current situation. Had we continued with our plan, it is very likely that the course would have been like the ones that the participants had attended previously, which were based in institutional models of pre-ordered sequences for crisis response and intervention, and the idea that they only had to replicate the models because what really works is a model of intervention that is well-applied.

Working from a practice based on spontaneity rather than pre-structure requires listening very carefully to the client. In this situation we had two clients: the Coordinator and the Community Promoters. It was important to find a way to work with and within the expectations of each. The Coordinator had her idea about what kind of training the participants needed, and the participants had their own ideas. The challenge was to work within each of these realities and expectations. The original program design, including the literature, was a point of departure. Our first client, the Coordinator, liked the pre-structured training program. Our second client, the training participants, told us they did not. From them we learned where and how to proceed from that starting point. Had we not collaborated with the participants, the training program could have been stilted, uninteresting, and a waste of time for the women and for us. Instead, it became a dynamic process that moved from planning to the spontaneity and from spontaneity to a continuous search for options.

The word "with" became a key that opened many doors for us. Having the attitude of working with rather than to, for, or about helped us facilitate an open dialog process in which honesty, trust, respect, and sensitivity to each others' requirements could be present. It allowed us to simultaneously position ourselves as professional experts with the IEGY institution and as learners with the training participants, walking alongside them and blending with them to build a relationship with less hierarchy and more equality.

Our pre-assumptions were at the same time the basis for building our work proposal and a limitations generator that we had to deal with. Though we have a long history of commitment to and experience in working collaboratively in our training and in our clinical work, we allowed ourselves to get swept away in our pre-assumptions and what was familiar for us. Fortunately, we were able to read the signals from the women. We were able to pause and "set aside" our pre-assumptions and allow ourselves to "see" the women in front of us that they wanted us to see and to learn about their needs for training from them. We could, as we have in our past experiences, trust that a process was being constructed through dialog and interpersonal relationships that would be beneficial to all.

It was through language that we built, un-built, and re-built everything; language was the means through which we could move from our position. We could transform our relations; we could dialogue and be with the others. Language generated difficulties but also was what dissolved them; it was through dialogue—trying to learn about and understand

what they were bringing that was unexpected and unfamiliar to us (e.g., their questions, their utterances, their behaviors)—that we could build spaces and collaborative relationships.

Finally, and as the most significant apprenticeship of this course, we cite Anderson (Anderson, 2007) again, when she speaks of the importance of our attitude and position towards others: “in order for there to be space for me and for the new, first it is necessary for there to be space for the client and for the familiar.”

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