Leaning in: Teaching Relational Practice Amidst Complexity

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Abstract

How can the way we teach better reflect what we are teaching? How can consideration of the lived realities in which practice takes place also be part of practitioner training? As a way of engaging with these questions, this article draws from the authors' experiences co-teaching an advanced family counselling course in which students and instructors embrace the many collaborative practices that comprise the content of the course itself. By not only learning about relational practice but also learning through relational approaches to education, students have the opportunity to experience the transformational potential of collaborative approaches to change. Ongoing challenges are also considered.

Key words: *collaborative inquiry; counsellor education; emergent design; family practice; relational practice*

The knot. An entanglement as a beginning…
Two people are in a conversation, working on a difficulty through dialogue. But they are not the only two players in this scene.
One leans forward. Listens.
Recalls training about micro skills and tries to perform the good counsellor. Open face, nodding head, compassionate eyes. Tries to listen but is distracted by the expectations, the desire to measure the outcomes of this performance, thinks ahead to how to ensure this story will have a happy ending. Closing, tightening, fear of losing control—as if she had any. Thinks back to all she's read about this kind of situation. Thinks back to inherited knowledge about just this scenario. Surely she should know what to say next.
The other leans forward. Speaks.
Slowly releasing bits and pieces of her story, assembling them in a way she hopes will make sense—will make her make some sense. Tries to speak coherently but is distracted by the expectations, the need to nail this performance because it's her only chance, thinks ahead to how to ensure this will be represented in a favourable light. Closing, tightening, feeling defeated before she's even begun. Thinks back to all she's experienced that no one will ever know. Thinks back to what she's already learned about how things play out. As if this conversation will change anything.

So many other dimensions are at play in this dialogical encounter: the material world that shapes and is shaped by how we interact with it; the social, political and economic realities that constrain and sustain what is possible; our personal lives including

emotional and physical health—whether or not we have had a good night's sleep. These are the things that so often determine what does and does not happen in a single moment, but so rarely make their way into discussions and training about clinical practice.

To prepare practitioners to relate with others well without considering the situational nature of practice is to prepare them only to work in fictional conditions. To speak of best practices in a decontextualized way is to set practitioners up to do badly when they are thrown into the mix of such muddled and conflicting realities that constitute our social world. How can we prepare practitioners to discern and act in unpredictable and unstable circumstances? How can we prepare them to engage meaningfully amidst the chaos of reality?

This, we believe, is to prepare them for the jobs they will actually be expected to do. Tidying out the complicated nature of our social world prepares practitioners for nothing they will actually face. How, then, can these many dimensions of lived experiences be meaningfully folded into our understanding of what practice entails, rather than sifted out as if they are somehow simply the backdrop for it?

How do we understand the knot as our starting place and help our students find ways to operate from within this entanglement? That is our task in this article.

Supercomplexity

The interaction above takes place amidst what many of us would acknowledge are very complex realities. Limited resources for practice, time constraints, increased competition, and ever-evolving notions of "best practice" are all part of the broader "knot" in which students are learning to be good practitioners. Adding to this complexity is a relatively new acknowledgement among human service practitioners: that strands of racialized and gendered discourses are threaded throughout political contexts that shape what we now know about experience itself. According to Westley, Zimmerman, and Patten (2007), "complex systems comprise complex relationships. Relationships exist *between* things. You can point at things, but you can't point at relationships. They are literally hard to see" (p. 10, emphasis added). This means students are not simply learning how to encounter another individual, but how to navigate the relational spaces that exist among them and other elements of these complex situations. "All complex systems," these authors remind us, "share behaviours that cannot be explained by their parts" (p. 7).

Barnett (2013), however, would take this a step further with his assertion that, in fact, we are living in *super*complex times. As a result of technological developments, globalization, multiculturalism, and other current realities, supercomplexity gives rise to:

   open-textured questions that yield, in a global and pluralist world, interpretations that are
   not just different but which are incompatible; and there is no straightforward way of
   resolving those differences. And this, in itself, marks off supercomplexity from

complexity. Supercomplexity produces a multiplication of incompatible differences of interpretation. (p. 67)

Although she does not use the word, Wheatley (2012) also notes the supercomplexity of our times. Rather than seeing it as an unsolvable dilemma, she instead presents it as an opportunity to use a different frame for the way we approach the world so that we might find different ways of engaging with(in) it. We need to recognize that the world is constantly creating itself anew.

Traditional notions of knowledge generation involve the observation and prediction of patterns in order to "master" something. Taking something apart to view its pieces and put them back together expecting it to work the same way is reasonable for some simple problems (see also Westley et al, 2007). But supercomplexity calls for a different way of seeing the world: an understanding of what Wheatley (2012) refers to as its "emergent design." Emergence, she says, is "the creation of new properties that do not resemble the parts and that therefore can never be understood by dissection" (p. 12). It means change is a creative force, and new realities are always being created as a result of what already exists coming together in generative ways. There is no going back, and there is no knowing what lies ahead.

Learning for an Unknown Future

So how can we prepare students for their roles in all of this supercomplexity as human service practitioners? How do we teach people to support others through change that is unknowable, when their very survival instincts may be instructing them to do otherwise? As Barnett (2013) clarifies,

Generic skills may seem to offer the basis of just such a learning for an unknown future. Generic skills, by definition, are those that surely hold across manifold situations, even unknown ones. I want to suggest, however that the idea of skills, even generic skills, is a cul-de-sac. In contrast, the way forward lies in construing and enacting a pedagogy for human being. In other words, learning for an unknown future has to be a learning understood neither in terms of knowledge or skills but of human qualities and dispositions. Learning for an unknown future calls, in short, for an ontological turn. (Barnett, 2013, p. 65)

What might be useful preparation for students who strive to work in the range of human service practices such as counselling, child and youth care, and social work? What might equip them to ethically and effectively support individuals and families who are struggling in conditions that are yet unknown?

Wheatley and Barnett draw our attention to the supercomplexities that surround situations and contexts in contemporary life. But what kinds of ontologies do we need to emphasize in our students without overwhelming them, without having them either close off or lapse into hopeless despair? What is required on the part of the practitioner when they realize the full

extent of the need for emergence?   What do we need to understand about the relations between practitioners and the families with whom they work?

Extending the idea that contexts are unknown, emergent, and supercomplex, it is important to describe the phenomenon more deeply when considering practice contexts. If in fact an ontological turn is needed, then what kind of ontology are we recommending or more to the point, how can we educate for what is a philosophical and ethical way of being? Drawing from Derrida's work on law and evidence, Macklin and Whiteford (2012) point out the shortcomings of scientific reasoning. While actually referring to research processes, there are similarities in how one comes to know the "truth of a situation." If situations that our practitioners encounter are, as the authors point out, "dripping with perplexities and inconsistencies such that judgements should never be seen as flowing easily from evidence" (p. 94), how can we best prepare our students for these kinds of situations?

Currently, most counselling programs use a micro skills approach wherein students are guided through basic communication skills such as empathic listening, paraphrasing, challenging, summarizing, and so on—all of which speak to the technical aspect of the relationship. These are useful skills, but not in and of themselves; there is much more involved than techniques found in the rules for good communication.   Research in discernment reminds us that advanced practice requires the capacity to see patterns, processes, and procedures (Hoskins & White, 2010). If we are to take seriously what we know about emergence and supercomplexity, we need to pay attention to much more than conversation.

Of course amidst all of this, there's *us* (and our students, and their future clients): real people, living real lives, facing real challenges. And we are some of the "parts" about which Wheatley is speaking. With the above discussion it becomes clear that not only are there "no stable descriptions of the world, [but] there are no stable descriptions of 'me.' The 'I' is liable to be destabilized" (Barnett, 2013, p. 70).   This raises significant questions about identity, subjectivity, and the self—central considerations for human service practitioners. To be destabilized in such a way is to have one's very existence threatened. When taken to the concrete level of the individual like this—as opposed to speaking in purely abstract terms—we start to experience these ideas not so much as the dream of all things being possible, but instead the nightmare of all things being annihilated.

Wheatley (2012) suggests that perhaps this is why we resist more emergent and responsive approaches to clinical support. "And here is life's ultimate paradox about change," Wheatley (2012) observes, "the only reason a living being changes is so it won't have to change. It will do whatever is necessary to preserve itself" (p. 41). Prescriptive approaches to clinical counselling skill development might help us maintain a semblance of control, but Wheatley suggests that inviting in emergence and unpredictability might in fact better prepare students for what they will face in practice. There are four main points that we want to emphasize in order to provide a framework for thinking differently about educating counsellors who are, nonetheless, tasked with the job of supporting clients through change—whether it is invited or not.

First is the recognition that *it is impossible to apply a principle mechanically* to a case because every decision to act in a certain way requires a unique interpretation or a re-invention of the principle itself. Principles and rules for "best" practices are always contingent and context dependant. Importantly, this is not to suggest a kind of moral relativism but to instead emphasize that a rule-bound ethics always covers over subtle nuances and complexities (see, for example, Caputo, 1993). At best, adhering to strict principles can be ineffective. But at worst it can be damaging, in that the unique situations particular clients are facing get painted with the same broad brush. The implication is that nothing can be laid out in advance in practice. One has to have the capacity to imagine, be creative, and pay attention not only to what is, but also to what *else* might be possible, or in Wheatley's (2012) terms, to prepare for and respond to things as they emerge. This does not mean going into a situation unprepared, but it does require that we are willing to *learn* and not just guide. Madsen (2007) paints a picture of ethical practice as inquiry, which speaks to this point, and Madsen and Gillespie (2014) articulate such practice as "disciplined improvisation" (p. 25).

Second is the realization that *ethical actions require us to consider the sometimes incommensurable dynamic*s between respect for universal rights and the rights of the individual (Caputo, 1993, p. 104). For instance, when working with families, there is sometimes a tension between the rights and obligations of the family as a whole and those of an individual family member. This means that not only is there no "right way" to be a family, but also that there are no set formulas for how to influence a family's unique way of living together. Rather than referring to universal practice principles to guide actions, practitioners are required to make decisions as they go along. In a recent study exploring discernment in practice (Hoskins & White, 2010), we found that practitioners used a variety of ways of knowing what to do next, with some ideas gleaned from popular culture, some from their family of origin, and some from their formal education. We did not see this as problematic in any way, as they were merely enacting what their clients did when assembling an everyday philosophy for how to live a good life. What we found troubling at times was how apologetic they were when they acknowledged that they often did not know how to discern what to do given the complexities of the families with whom they work. If we could create space for this uncertainty, alleviating some of this shame, perhaps we can be more deliberate and conscious about how it is responded to in moments that require decisions to be made.

Third, amidst all of these challenges, is *the need to act quickly*. Practitioners rarely have the luxury of being able to thoroughly think through a decision and often have to work with partial information. Although referring to ethical action in everyday life, Caputo (1993) reminds us that even in those situations where time is available to an individual "still there comes a time—a finite moment of urgency and precipitation—when the leap must be made, the gap crossed, the decision taken" (p. 105). This is especially true when working with families under stress, when children's wellbeing is often at stake. Practitioners have to be able to make quick decisions and act on partial and sometimes contradictory evidence. It is this necessary wisdom that Caputo argues is needed when events throw us into incommensurable and conflicting choices—the ones

that can throw us into the "difficulty of factical life without the guardrails of metaphysics or ethics" (p. 102). Despite this kind of uncertainty, practitioners ultimately need to be able to act in the meantime.

Finally, and significantly, is *the importance of integrating opportunities for reflection within practice* rather than thinking of it as something that takes place after the fact. Years ago, Schon (1987) reminded us that it is only when reflecting on action that we can begin to make sense of or theorize our approaches. This means, if we create space for frequent reflection—ideally with support from supervisors and colleagues—we will be better equipped to make informed decisions as we go based on new insights and ever-changing conditions. Westley, Zimmerman, and Pattern (2007) refer to this as "developmental evaluation" which is an ongoing process of engaging, recording, reflecting, and re-engaging differently on the basis of new information (p. 83). This provides a balance between overly rigid and completely haphazard decision-making in practice and is a crucial tool to cultivate if we acknowledge emergence is at play in the lives of our clients.

Given what we have now described, we return to our question: How can we provide educational experiences that prepare students for these complex situations? What alternatives can we explore in additional to the technical side of the work found in micro skills approaches? If it is true that we need an ontological turn in postsecondary education, how might we create a learning environment that promotes such a turn?

Curators of Space

As a way of engaging with these questions, we will draw from our experiences co-teaching a fourth year undergraduate course entitled *Advanced Child and Youth Care Practice with Families*, in which students and instructors embrace the many collaborative practices that comprise the content of the course itself. As instructors of this course, we see our job as to *curate the* space[1] in such a way that this learning can occur. We also see the concept of curator to be in keeping with what we've set out to describe, that of relational teaching. And by this we mean not only an ontology of a particular type but also the merging of ontology and epistemology. Knowing and being are intricately connected, and the learning environment or space matters.

Think, for a moment, of the role played by the curator in an art gallery. In doing so we realize that the art on the walls is quite deliberately selected. Not only must each piece have something to say, but collectively the various pieces in the body of work must also speak to each other. Ideally, they will engage viewers not only with the art, but also with each other, and with their own inner processes. The space itself, if curated well, will be transformative. Massey (2005) asks, "What might it mean to…question that habit of thinking of space as a surface? If, instead, we conceive of a meeting up of histories, what happens to our implicit imaginations of time and space?" (p. 4).

If we understand space in this generative and evocative way, then as instructors we also curate the space in which we are teaching. Our roles as curators involve the material world as well as the relational dynamic deliberately cultivated among members of the class, and the tools we employ to engage students in their own learning journeys. This curation, we determine, begins not only the first day of class, but even with the syllabus and welcome letter (or video) that is the first introduction students have to the course. Deliberately setting a particular tone and creating a certain kind of invitation is all part of teaching for our unknown future—or preparing students to engage in "knotty" situations such as the one that opened this paper. As instructors, we understand our roles to be that of creating opportunities for students to experience themselves ontologically, as discussed above. Experimenting with different ways of being and honing their own capacities to cultivate them and support each other in their development throughout the course is our ultimate intention.

The notion of curating space helps us to understand our roles as facilitative rather than directive. We, ourselves, are also constantly experimenting with new ways of doing this, and what follows are some teaching strategies that seem to support us in our efforts to "teach for an unknown future."

In addition to curating the space like the curator in the museum as we've just described, there are other activities beyond interacting with works of art. Carrying this metaphor further, we can think of the artist and the creation. Each encounter with another has an aesthetic aspect—one that speaks to the generative processes and generosity. If as educators and curators we have opportunities to co-create new ontologies with our students, then it follows that certain learning activities are commensurate with these pedagogical visions. If we can provide enough structure without stifling each person's creative potential to think and act differently—or, for that matter even the same—then we have room to move. We can provoke, stimulate, excite, motivate, and invite.

Teaching for an Unknown Future

As mentioned, the course from which we are drawing is an advanced family practice course, so it is designed with the assumption that students will be already equipped with certain micro skills such as listening actively and asking certain kinds of questions. That said, Madsen and Gillespie (2014) remind us that in fact only 15% of therapy outcomes are "attributable to technique, that is what practitioners do in therapy" (p. 26). The rest is determined by factors including the things that take place in clients' lives outside of therapy (40%), relational dynamics between the counsellor and client such as empathy and genuineness (30%), and a shared sense of hope and expected change (15%). With this in mind, for an advanced course in working with families, it makes sense to attend to these other, more nuanced elements of the interaction, even though—admittedly—techniques are much easier to both teach and evaluate.

So as a means of scaffolding (Gauvain, 2006) from their earlier learning towards the more complex (indeed, supercomplex) worlds in which they will be working, we curate the space in

our classrooms in such a way that collaboration, experimentation, reflection, and then re-engagement can take place. The course is an intensive course, with students coming together for five eight-hour days in a row. This means we have the opportunity to truly immerse ourselves in the process, take shared responsibility for the learning, and draw from the collective wisdom among the group.

Since this is a collaborative and emergent journey—and since we cannot know outcomes in advance—our key responsibility is to curate a space that might facilitate such a process. We see this as a valuable experience since this is precisely what our students are preparing for, and we are transparent about this deliberate congruence of form and content (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009) at the outset. What follows is not a "how to" guide, but rather a case in point of how we are experimenting with teaching for an unknown future. Each time we teach the course it changes, but we believe there is still value in speaking in concrete terms (however fleeting) as a way to not nail things down, but rather engage the imagination.

Day One

Our first day is spent dealing with both the practical and relational components of the course. Rather than seeing these activities as simply setting the stage for the "real work," we understand these to be an important *parts* of the real work, and things that have to be revisited continuously (Richardson & Reynolds, 2012) throughout the week, as discussions on day one will have new meaning later once the students have had the opportunity to begin working together.

The major task of the first day is to cultivate the conditions in which the experimental processes discussed above might take place. We want students to push themselves and each other throughout the week so that growth and learning can take place, but at the same time we want this gentle risk-taking to be safe enough that true learning can occur. Of course, this line may be different for each of them, so it is up to us to guide them in attending to each other's learning processes.

Ideally, class sizes for such a practice-based course will be small, and the room will be arranged in a circle. The morning is spent getting to know each other, discussing the layout and expectations of the course, and doing some small and large group activities that engage students in discussion with each other about some of the concepts that appeared in the course text book. Engaging in these various activities builds some comfort and rapport among the group, most of whom are meeting each other for the first time.

Students are told about the small groups (of three) in which they will be role playing throughout the week. They will each have the opportunity to play the role of a family counsellor three times, which means they will also play the role of a family member (client) twice. When they are neither counsellor nor client, they have the important role of reflecting team member (see elaboration below). They are given a general overview of what the remainder of the week will look like in terms of schedule, while the content of the various sessions will remain up to them.

After lunch on the first day, we move away from logistics into some more experiential learning with a demonstration session, as well as some broader discussions and activities about "counselling as inquiry" as described by Madsen and Gillespie (2014). Significant conversations about stereotyping, integration of matters of diversity, and social justice are addressed throughout these learning activities, as a way of "curating the space" for the week to come.

We regroup at the end of the day in order to ensure students leave with a good sense of what lies ahead, as well as the active roles they will be playing in their own and each other's learning. Creating these time-limited "containers" of smaller sessions provides a certain amount of security for students—even while they come to understand that within each of those "containers" unknowable and unpredictable futures will be enacted. This is where emergence is designed into the course in a way that is not so unsettling for students as to be too unsettling.

Disciplined Improvisation

Since role playing generally evokes some fear and performance anxiety, it is important that students are told that 1.) the reason for role playing (rather than using real scenarios) is for emotional safety, and 2.) their role plays are not graded. Generally, anxiety persists until after they've experienced their first sessions, at which time the level of comfort—and thus capacity to integrate learning experientially—increases. This is why we have each group role play three times. Here is a reflection from one former student on the utility of this structure:

> Three [sessions] was a great fit for the learning journey. I think the three role plays, and the manner in which we signed up for them…was great...My learning, critical engagement/reflection, and growth, I think, stemmed from having the opportunity to role play three times. I do think that it's an optimal number for diving in to explore the family and to really participate in the experiential learning process. Three also provides a lot of opportunity to synthesize learning from times when the class is all together and from observing and/or acting in others' role plays. (M. Ridgeway, personal communication, November 3, 2014)

During these role plays, one student is counsellor, two are family members who are seeking counselling, and there are several who comprise a reflecting team. They spend half of the allotted time in the simulated session and half learning from the collective wisdom of the group with the reflecting team. Students are coached on the role of reflecting teams, which is not to provide feedback on what should have been done differently but rather to engage with the scenario through curiosity and with the posture of an "appreciative ally" (Madsen, 2007, p. 22). The discussions that take place don't narrow down towards what "should" happen, but rather open up possibilities for additional conversations and avenues for exploration with the clients. It is important that those who role play (including the counsellor and the clients) have opportunities to reflect back on and engage in discussion around what reflecting team members have said. These discussions deepen throughout the week as students participate in many different sessions

and play all three roles. Their ability to deepen the conversation and cultivate the language and skills of "collaborative inquiry" (Madsen, 2007) begins to be taken up by those in both reflecting team *and* counsellor roles in the role plays.

It is clear that while there is a great deal of discipline, organization, and preparation required for this to be an optimal learning experience, these are also primarily improvised encounters. The learning and teaching takes place in moments as they emerge and thus cannot be determined from the outset, just as would be the case when engaging with a family amidst uncertain conditions. Ontologically, we are informed by ideas such as Gergen's (2009) constructionist notion of relational being. Whereas traditional clinical pedagogy often involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the role plays in this course are not about performance but rather disciplined improvisation—that is, coordinating action. We agree with Gergen, who asserts that "[w]hen education focuses on relationships as opposed to individuals, we enter a new world of possibility. Our concern shifts from what is taking place 'within minds,' to our life together" (p. 269).

Integrating Complexity

While most of the week is spent in these small groups, it is also important to come together as a class daily. This gives students the opportunity to switch into a gear that differs from the intensive engagement required in these sessions. As instructors, we often take this time to present about broader issues that relate to practice, invite guest speakers in to share their perspectives and experiences, or create forums for discussions as a class. This enables a meta-perspective to be integrated into the ongoing smaller, interpersonal interactions that occur around the role plays, and provides an opportunity to address issues arising.

As demonstrated at the beginning of this article with the metaphor of the knot, it is crucial that practitioners not get so mired in the intricacies of an interaction that they forget the political, social, economic, and cultural elements that may also be at play (see, for example: deFinney, Dean, Loiselle, & Saraceno, 2011; Newbury, 2009; Reynolds, 2010). Our large class time is an opportunity to ensure these remain a significant part of the learning process and make their way into the simulated counselling sessions.

We have noticed, over years spent teaching this course, that students often rely on stereotypes to enact their characters in a role play. If unattended to, this can lead to reinforcing some of the challenges and even injustices faced by "clients." Stereotypes persist, despite the fact that, theoretically, the students in this class have been prepared to critically reflect on matters of diversity in prerequisite courses. Of course, we live in a society in which dominant narratives of gender, age, and culture exist. The role plays give us an opportunity to encounter these tendencies with compassion and curiosity, rather than simply talk about them. This opens space for new ways of engaging that can support both practitioners and clients to find counternarratives that open their worlds beyond these stereotypes.

Many of the students in our program are young and female, and we have found the tendency to limit possibilities based on stereotypes of fathers to be particularly persistent. An example drawn from a recent class involved the father's difficulty in connecting with his daughter, in comparison with the competency he felt in being a good dad to his sons. He believed that since he didn't like to do "girl things," the possibilities for connection were naturally limited and he was just coming to terms with that. He seemed genuinely disappointed. Thus during the reflecting team discussion after the session, we discussed ways of exploring this gendered assumption without confronting the father in a way that would be experienced as judgemental. Drawing from narrative therapy, we discussed how to examine "exceptions" to this belief. Were there times when he and his daughter had connected in the past? Could he describe these moments, however fleeting? What were they doing? How did the situation come about? What might need to happen for such a situation to be possible again? Drawing from past experiences to find exceptions to dominant narratives about gender roles (or other stereotypes) can slowly open the door to find new ways for this man to be a good dad to his daughter. In conversations like this, the students saw that individual experiences are directly impacted by broader social forces (such as gendered assumptions), just as broader dynamics are comprised of these smaller moments.

This kind of discussion and experimentation enables students to explore how we are all entangled in a web of knots, and that there is no getting outside of supercomplexity. But we can engage, reflect, and re-engage differently in efforts to participate in these dynamics a little more deliberately. In this way too, the lines between inquiry and practice are also blurred, and students begin to experience both the collective and the cumulative nature of this kind of learning.

Transformational Learning

Having the opportunity to constantly shift between the roles of counsellor, client, and reflecting team member gives the students opportunities to experience the coming together of multiple realities. In the counsellor role, many students spend their first session trying to "get it right," But having three sessions gives them the time to talk through the challenges they faced in each one and to slowly settle into their own approach to practice with families. Some students are adept at narrative approaches, which rely on a deep understanding of the way stories are constructed and counterstories can be developed in collaboration with clients (White & Epston, 1990). Some draw on cognitive behaviour approaches (Laliberte, Nagel, & Haswell, 2010) and some draw from solution-focused brief therapy (Jones-Smith, 2012). Others have brought in guitars and art supplies, connecting and collaborating with their clients through creativity (Cattanach, 2003). Having the opportunity to experiment with, witness, *and* be on the receiving end of such a wide range of approaches provides a plethora of "knots" in which students can engage and then reflect on the complexities of intervention.

While most students enter the class assuming their priority will be the three sessions in which they are playing the role of counsellor and working to "master" skills, their final assignments (which include reflections on all three roles as well as an integration of theory) overwhelmingly

express surprise at the transformational experiences of being both reflecting team members and clients. The discomfort of being a client in a session with a counsellor whose developing style may differ from one's own can be unsettling, but it raises important questions about agency in the change process. These moments of discomfort often serve to enhance attention to and compassion for clients, as students become more attuned to the experiences clients may have beyond the words they speak to counsellors. On the other hand, moments when simulated clients really felt heard and understood by their "counsellor" also served to deepen their learning. Most students remark that they are surprised at the sense of possibility they feel when their counsellor stops trying to provide answers or solutions and instead demonstrates in very subtle ways that he or she is really present. This, importantly, gives them the confidence to slow down and *lean into* the experiences of their clients with curiosity—understanding that this will support clients to reach their own solutions—rather than think they should be equipped with ready-made fixes to clients' very unique situations (Madsen & Gillespie, 2014). And finally, by being reflecting team members, students learn not only to look at the scenario from multiple vantage points but also how to provide feedback in a way that is constructive, relational, and respectful.

It is the coming together of these different experiences, and the oscillating among them, that provides fertile ground for reflection, growth, and integration of the knowledge they are collaboratively constructing. This very directly connects with the concept of supercomplexity, in that students in this course find themselves immersed in sometimes contradictory positions. Since the "curriculum" is in many ways driven by the students in the room(s), they may find themselves bumping up against different practices and even paradigms throughout the course. When the focus of learning is on getting on together amidst complexity (rather than mastering discrete knowledge), this enhances the opportunity for deep engagement. In his discussion of "relational being," Gergen (2009) reminds us that "Conflicting goods will always be with us. The challenge is not that of creating a conflict-free existence, but of locating ways of approaching conflict that do not invite mutual extermination. Given the circumstances of human coordination, how do we go on?" (p. 360). Coordinating action among differences (philosophical, practical, theoretical, and otherwise) becomes a significant component of the transformational potential of this course.

Many of our students (even those who take all of their other courses online) have to travel great distances to take this course before graduating, and many admit to feeling resentful of that. But by the end of it, student feedback consistently shows this to be a transformational course in that it enhances their understanding of the complexities and range of client experiences and also increases their confidence in stepping into these complexities as practitioners.

Lingering Questions and Ongoing Challenges

Our intention here is not to lay out a flawless course design for teaching for an unknown future, as this would obviously be contradictory to the fact that reality is constantly changing through multiplicity and emergence, and such a course would be obsolete the moment it was written. Even though we have taught this course many times, we revisit its content and design each time

it is offered, with certain questions and challenges in mind. What follows is a brief discussion of some of those with which we continue to grapple in the hopes of curating an optimal learning environment for each new group of students. Our intention here is not to iron out these complexities or resolve them once and for all, but rather to suggest that, in actuality, it is the grappling with them that is important.

First is the question of emotional safety. Given the content of some of the sessions, we have had to collaborate with students to strategize around how they can determine how much and how little risk they wish to take. "Triggers" exist, and it is not always possible to know when something might arise. Doing what we can to prepare those role playing and those in reflecting teams for what they are entering into, and having support in place for times when someone does experience emotional difficulties, are all part of the process in such a practice-oriented course.

Next is the integration of matters of social justice and diversity. Given this is a course about working with families, and given the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal children, youth, and families in our systems (de Finney et al, 2011) it is crucial that this be integrated into their learning in more than conceptual ways. The experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in relation to these issues will be wide-ranging and space needs to be made for multiple perspectives to be validated. As instructors, we have been learning from our students over the years about how such space can be made, and we continue to strive for a learning environment that can do justice to this centrally important issue.

Third, there are logistical concerns that face us, as our institutions strive to cut corners and save money. A small class size is crucial for us to have the kinds of discussions noted above and the supervision required for them to take place optimally. We continue to struggle against the pressure to fit more students in the classroom, and advocate for pedagogical practices that promote collaborative learning environments such as this one. Ensuring we have space, time, and small class sizes to ethically engage with the sensitive and complicated content of this course is our responsibility as educators, but it is something we cannot do without institutional support.

Fourth, we struggle constantly with the dance between providing students with freedom to explore and experiment and providing a rigorous education, including evaluation. Ultimately, students in our course will be working directly with families upon graduation. There is an ethical imperative that they be competent in their field of practice before this happens, and for many of them, this is their final opportunity to receive feedback from instructors. Thus, the flexibility to make mistakes and learn from them is balanced with the necessity of providing concrete feedback and guidance that will contribute to their capacity to support the families with whom they will engage in the very near future.

This is not a complete list of questions and concerns, as new issues constantly arise. But continuing to come together with colleagues, former students, and supervisors to grapple with issues as they arise is part of what teaching for an unknown future requires of us.

Conclusion

Earlier we outlined a framework that can contribute to teaching for an unknown future. It consists of the following four points:

1. It is impossible to apply a principle mechanically
2. Ethical actions require us to consider sometimes incommensurable dynamics
3. The need to act quickly
4. The importance of integrating opportunities for reflection within practice

This framework guides our relational approach to teaching our students, and it also outlines the general learning that we hope they will take with them as they engage with families in their practice outside of the classroom. Ontologically, it reflects Gergen's (2009) notion of relational being, which informs "educational practices that reflect, sustain, and advance productive forms of relational being" (p. 241). Thus teaching relational practice *relationally* means that the way we teach and what we teach are, in many ways, one and the same. Our intention in this course is to cultivate a space in which students can experiment with this framework in a range of simulated "knotty" situations, such as the one that opened the paper. Such a framework can release the practitioner from having to adhere to "right" ways of approaching a family's complex and ever-changing situation, which can in turn free the client from having to perform perfectly in order to receive services. This framework enables practitioners and clients to improvise together but in a way that is responsive, ethical, pragmatic, and informed—while still acknowledging that they are being called to step into the flow of "supercomplexity" that can never be fully known or predicted.

Working together, the students in this course enhance their own learning and also contribute to the collective learning of the cohort—just as would ideally be the case for the families with whom they will eventually be working. By not only learning about relational practice but also learning *through* relational teaching, learning, and inquiry, students have the opportunity to experience the transformational potential of collaborative approaches to change.

The knot. An entanglement as a beginning …
Two people are in a conversation, working on a difficulty through dialogue. But they are
not the only two players in this scene.
One leans forward. Listens.
Open face, nodding head, compassionate eyes. As she listens, she realizes that there is
much more at play than the presenting issue as it appeared on the intake form. She finds herself
impressed by the resilience of this woman in the face of so many challenges beyond her control.
She is curious about where she developed the skills to navigate such complicated territory. She
wants to know about where she draws strength, and who in her life has been there for her. She
believes others can also learn from this woman's experience. But she can see also that her client
is feeling at a loss and is tired. Understandably. Her face softens and she sits back in her chair.
The other leans forward. Speaks.

Slowly releasing bits and pieces of her story, she begins by assembling them in a way she hopes will make sense—will make her make some sense. But as she speaks, she notices something different about this counsellor. She's not taking notes; she's not rushing in with referrals and answers. She's listening. The counsellor sees her. A loosening and an opening, the details of the story now seem less significant. The counsellor is asking her questions about who she is, about what matters to her. As she begins to respond, the urgency of reaching solutions lessens and—paradoxically—possibilities seem to present themselves for what seems like the first time. Not answers, exactly, but at least avenues that were not apparent before. A subtle sense of hope emerges. This is new. She's not out of the woods yet, but for the first time she lets herself believe it will happen. Her shoulders relax and she breathes in. Settles into the brief silence which no one tries to fill.

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End Notes

[1]This metaphor is borrowed from Al Etmanski, who presented at the *Groundswell* conference at Vancouver Island University in Powell River, BC, January 29, 2014.

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