

# “The Whole ME presented itself. KABOOM!”: Expressive Arts and Critical Reflection

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*The importance of critical reflection in higher education highlights the importance of creating rich learning opportunities for students. Expressive arts (e.g., poetry, drama) ignites such opportunity drawing from more than students' logical-cognitive understandings to include students' creative, multi-modal and experiential capacities. This paper provides one university instructor's reflective account of how an expressive arts final assignment (in a non-arts course) invited students to use the languages of the arts to enhance their critical reflection of course learning. Students' expanded agency and complexity of understanding illustrated expressive arts as a valuable facet of academic work.*

*L'importance de la réflexion critique en éducation postsecondaire rehausse l'intérêt de créer des occasions riches en apprentissage pour les étudiants. Les arts expressives (p. ex. la poésie, les arts de la scène) offrent de telles occasions en allant chercher au-delà des connaissances logiques et cognitives des étudiants pour puiser dans leurs capacités créatrices, multimodales et expérientielles. Cet article présente le compte rendu d'un professeur à l'université sur le rôle d'un travail final reposant sur les arts expressives (dans un cours ne relevant pas du domaine des arts) qui a encouragé les étudiants à utiliser le langage des arts pour mettre en valeur leur réflexion critique du cours. La marge de manœuvre élargie des étudiants et la complexité accrue de leurs connaissances reflètent le rôle important des arts expressives dans le travail académique.*

The significance of student critical reflection within higher education is clearly apparent within our complex societal, academic, personal and professional landscapes. As instructors we are challenged to engage students in increasingly rich, meaningful ways. In designing a final assignment for Faculty of Education graduate students, I queried, “How can students critically reflect on their learning in complex, meaningful ways?” For me, this meant inviting more than students' cognitive, rationale-linear understandings, thus leading to consideration of strategies employing expressive arts. Expressive arts, which span many forms of creative work (e.g., video, poetry, drama, dance), are being examined for their potential to enhance student learning in higher education (Cole, Sugioka, & Yamagata-Lynch, 1999; Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006; Lawrence, 2005; Phipps, 2010). Expressive arts strategies are creative and experiential. They invite students to attend to multiple ways of knowing while working alone or with others. Forms of artistic expression invite new opportunities for inquiry, experience and sense-making, which in turn, offer students new landscapes of reflection on themselves, their studies and their views of the world.

I developed an expressive arts final assignment for several (non-arts-based) graduate

courses in a Faculty of Education. The assignment asked students to use expressive arts (e.g., collage, poetry, music, drama) as their modality to critically reflect on (e.g., analyse) and express (e.g., represent, disseminate) their learning. This paper is my reflective account of how this assignment enhanced student critical reflection by expanding their agency (as knowledge producers) and supporting them to engage greater complexity in their learning. Perspectives from the literature, excerpts from my teaching journal and student experiences are included to ground this exploration. I conclude this paper by arguing that expressive arts is a valuable facet of student academic work.

### **Critical Reflection, Expressive Arts and Higher Education**

Phipps (2010) states, “the literature on critical thinking and criticality in higher education is substantial” (p. 43). She indicates critical thinking is “embedded into benchmark statements and learning aims and outcomes” in universities, proclaiming, “It is what we do” (Phipps, 2010, p. 43). As a university instructor, I position student critical reflection as pivotal to the learning process. I understand critical reflection as a process whereby students examine the multiple meanings, assumptions and perspectives associated with knowledge and its relevance for varied contexts. I agree with Brockback & McGill’s (1998) perspective that, at its best, critically reflective learning is “that which enables the learner to engage in deep and transformatory learning” (p. 79). In this way critical reflection involves more than critical thinking; students need to engage critically “with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge” (Barnett, 1997, p. 1). They need to develop, according to Barnett, a sense “of critical being, which embraces critical thinking, critical action and critical self-reflection” (p. 1) within the context of viewing knowledge as socially constructed, or as Barnett states, as “something not given . . . [but] socially sustained and invested and backed by power” (p. 5). It was my hope that the expressive arts assignment could invite such challenge and possibility for complex engagement by supporting students to weave connections, juxtapose difference, construct patterns and engage in multiple ways of knowing (Eisner, 2008, 2009; Eisner, 1998, 2001 ) while also engaging them in learning landscapes of contradiction, tension, fragmentation, ambiguity, chaos, not-knowing and disjuncture (Gude, 2004, 2007; Jagodzinski, 2009a, 2009b; Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007).

Unless students are studying the arts (e.g., music, visual art) as their formal discipline of academic study, university settings tend to relegate learning via expressive arts to the margins of serious scholarly endeavour. Drawing from Greene’s work, Lawrence (2005) states, “cognitive knowing has dominated the adult-education classroom, where the curriculum typically emphasizes transmission of knowledge through cultural reproduction. We prize reading, writing, and intellectual discourse” (p. 4). Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl (2006) concur, stating “educators who work in formal educational settings often use expressive [arts] activities as icebreakers or as respite from analytical thinking, but they view these activities as disconnected from what they think of as ‘real’ learning” (p. 27). Or as Arnheim (1969) states, “. . . the arts are considered as a training in agreeable skills, as entertainment and mental release” (p. 3). This perspective is reflective of either/or discourses which restrict academic work to rational-linear intellectual processes or relate to students’ non-linear, non-rational ways of knowing (e.g., intuitive, affective), but fail to attend to how these modalities can align with students’ cognitive processes. Both discourses keep expressive arts disconnected from instructors’ curriculum objectives, pedagogical priorities and course assignments.

It is interesting, if not ironic, that even though "artistic expression has been an integral part of human nature and communication for longer than we can document" (Manner, 2002, p. 18), most university students are not accustomed to expressive arts comprising a central facet of their academic work. Engaging expressive arts, whether through the medium of dance, music, or collage, for instance, invites students into a "coloured, sounding" world (Michelli, 2005, p. 7). It extends student learning beyond logical-linear thinking to include languages of lateral and divergent thinking, imaginal and unspoken terrains, symbols and metaphors, and intuitive, affective, somatic, subconscious and other forms of knowing. Lawrence (2005), for instance, relays that artistic expression opens opportunities for diverse ways of knowing and learning by extending the "boundaries of how we come to know, by honoring multiple intelligences and indigenous knowledge" (p. 1). In recognizing, as Manner (2002) states, that "it would be unwise to create an artificial curriculum barricade against this intensely human expression" (p. 18), university instructors can explore ways to engage expressive arts as a valuable facet of student learning.

My contribution to this effort is to explore how an expressive arts assignment (used in non-arts courses) might enhance students' critical reflection on their course learning. In making such an attempt, considering some of the connections between creativity and critical reflection became important. The significance of creativity to critical reflection can be explored as complimentary, synergistic and/or inseparable. Paul (1993) argues that "creativity and criticality [need to be] interwoven into one seamless fabric" (p. 23). Curzon-Hobson (2003) depicts this inseparability by framing critical reflection as the learner's "search for new and unique possibilities through imagination and creation" (p. 202). A synergistic link is relayed in Greene's assertion that aesthetic education is "integral to the development of persons - to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional and imaginative thinking" (as cited in Michelli, 2005, p. 7). This notion of dynamic interrelationality is further articulated by Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, (2006) who refer to arts-based forms of knowing as "an important bridge between precognitive, prelinguistic experiential knowing and conceptual knowing, . . . referred to as rational or analytical knowing" (p. 30). The complementary relationship between the arts and academic learning is relayed by Wolcott (2001) who reports that when "students are encouraged to use their artistic strength to express their academic knowledge . . . the skills of analysis and synthesis they hone both in the arts and in academics are mutually reinforcing" (p. 62). Hotvedt (2001) indicates that "by integrating arts into the curriculum, I have seen students master concepts that I had thought were beyond their abilities" (p. 72). In similar complementarity, White & Robinson (2001) state that "the process of thinking through the production of art will broaden the student's receptivity of the purely conceptual aspects of the subject he or she is studying" (p. 84).

While connections between creativity and critical reflection warrant further exploration within higher education contexts, consideration of their potential complimentary, synergistic and/or inseparable relations supported me to become more mindful of how an expressive arts assignment may enhance student critical reflection on their course learning. Drawing from Hotvedt's (2001) observation, would students master concepts in a way they hadn't thus far? Would student engagement with multiple ways of knowing lend more nuanced, complex understandings? Would students experience their creative and critical reflective efforts as inseparable, as Paul (1993) suggests? These questions heightened my appreciation of the potential "dance" of differentiation, overlap and synergy between critical reflection and creativity.

## Planning and Implementing an Expressive Arts Assignment

I used an expressive arts assignment in three Faculty of Education (non-arts) graduate courses: (a) group work/counselling, (b) program development, and (c) working with families in educational contexts. Each course was a face-to-face, three-hour weekly class over four months with 12 to 20 students. The assignment comprised the four-step process outlined below:

1. Students wrote four-page individual reflections on their theoretical/applied and professional/personal learning (which would be shared with the class). Their reflections were to highlight areas of learning and to identify insights, gaps, tensions, limitations and contradictions within our area of study.
2. Students formed small working groups and reviewed all of the student reflection papers (including their own). Their task was to critically reflect on students' course learning (as articulated in their reflective responses) using (their choice of) creative expression(s) (e.g., poetry, collage) both as their tool of analysis and method of knowledge dissemination.
3. Working groups shared their completed creative work in class to stimulate further reflection.
4. Students submitted their creative work(s) for assessment and wrote a summary statement describing their creative process and learning.

I undertook various planning and implementation strategies to support student success. Students were informed that the assignment did not involve becoming or proving oneself to be “artistic”; it involved using expressive arts as a tool to enhance learning. The creation of a comfortable, respectful environment to support students' exploration and expression (not strained or competitive) was given priority; conditions supportive of students' creativity in the classroom were enhanced (Cole, Sugioka, & Yamagata-Lynch, 1999). Exploring student strengths and needs, positioning myself as co-learner and providing meaningful opportunities for student interaction supported student readiness for the assignment. Class time was allotted to support student progress on their assignment; time was spent fielding and posing questions, engaging discussion, problem solving, observing student engagement and affirming student efforts. As a class, we collectively shared our skills and resources (e.g., knowledge on editing video, lending cameras, offering tips on working with clay, sharing articles/books/web sites). Watching students progress on their assignments, I asked, for instance: Why did you choose this creative medium and how is it shaping your reflections? What successes and challenges are you encountering and how are these impacting your engagement with this assignment?

I used expressive arts pedagogies in my teaching. Curriculum was engaged through poetry, song, metaphor, movement, drama, story, and visual art. One strategy involved students picking something from a bowl of objects (e.g., stones, dice, wool, beads, toy objects). On one occasion, each student chose an object to relay a taken-for-granted class or gender assumption within the assigned readings; on another occasion students picked an object which juxtaposed two divergent course concepts. Serving as symbols/metaphors, the objects stimulated new meanings, questions and complexities for class exploration. Another strategy involved creating class poems. In one instance, after watching a group counselling video which relayed heated conflicts between group members (based on race and sexual orientation), I invited the class to stand and form a circle. I asked each student to compose one line in the poem by stating, in turn, one word or line which reflected their experience of the video. The poem was performed several

more times to absorb multiple meanings. Drawing on student suggestions, the poem was performed using different rhythms, tones and nuance; stanzas in the poem were reordered; poems were spoken with eyes open and closed to both reflect and ignite the diversities of their learning. Remaining in the circle students identified common and divergent threads in the poem; they spoke of shifts and changes in our own group connection and in their experience and understanding of the video. Other strategies included (a) creating body sculptures to depict connections and disconnections/disassociations they experienced to course content, (b) having students write children's stories to convey a theoretical perspective from a fresh (child-centred) perspective, (c) using free drawing strategies to depict forms of knowing and unknowing being experienced in class, and (d) creating class collages and graffiti boards to map and depict trends and shifts in learning.

Student assignments were graded via instructor and student self-assessment. Students participated in discussing criteria to assess their work; this process resulted in meaningful conversations on knowledge production within academia and greater student ownership of their learning. Common criteria guiding the assessment process included (a) quality and complexity of critical reflection, (b) exploration and use of creative ideas/processes, and (c) impact of creative expression (e.g., ability to communicate, move, disrupt).

### **A Reflective Inquiry Process**

Samaras and Freese (2006) state, "reflective practitioners . . . consciously and creatively examine and problematize their teaching by reflecting on their practice" (p. 26). In writing this reflection-on-practice paper, I was informed by my teaching journal, students' expressive assignments and relevant literature. My teaching journal has been an on-going facet of my reflective practice as an instructor. I use jot notes, descriptive paragraphs, concept/mind maps, images, quotes and doodling as tools of expression. My journal practice is a rhythmic, yet evolving process, documenting logistics, overviews, key learning moments and memories related to course planning, implementation, class discussion and student work. It is a reflective space for questioning, re-framing, strategizing and problem solving related to my own experiences and student accounts of their experience. One journal excerpt reads:

Highlight - student discussion of more comfort in moving between theory and practice, structure and flexibility and context and process stimulated by the creative work (moving out of conceptual boxes towards more real life messy dynamics); student just confessed, "When I read the course outline and saw this assignment I honestly thought it was a typo. I never thought something like this would be allowed at university." . . . hmm, eye opening; curious re: 'X' being vocal and taking issue with some of the cultural assumptions made in textbook chapter during the expressive arts presentations (hmm, first time 'X' has openly challenged white western 'expert' knowledge in the class ) why today? Realized I was waiting, perhaps hoping for this. Did today's arts invite this opening for "X"? Need to learn from this (improve my practice for next time) . . . (Instructor journal)

My cumulative file containing samples of student work was shaped by logistics (e.g., size of artifact), student invitations to keep their work and wanting samples of different art modalities. Direct student quotes in this paper have been used with student permission. The examination of students' critical reflection was informed by multiple reflective strategies. Several readings of my teaching journal and student assignments were conducted and key points related to student learning were then highlighted across these texts. In my readings, I attended to shifts in student

learning and experience, expansions of complexity of learning and ways of knowing, and illustrations of student engagement were noted. I then compared key points within and across the journal and student assignments and common themes were identified.

### **Expressive Arts: Expanding the Boundaries of Learning**

Students engaged in a variety of creative forms including: poetry, video, drama, collage, story boards, paintings, ceremony, music, dance/movement, digital graphic art and photography. Student learning and engagement related to this assignment were multidimensional. Here I highlight two central themes which were identified during my reflective analytical process: (a) students' "expansion of agency" and (b) the "engagement with greater complexity" of learning.

#### **Expanding agency**

The assignment brought me out of my inner shell. It was as if I was living in a textbook. The concepts were no longer abstract ideas represented by combinations of the alphabet. They were experiences, that felt real, meaningful and powerful . . . I was able to find my voice. I challenged my worldviews, assumptions and societal and family values. I was engaging in self discovery. I embraced the opportunity to become more than the sum of my parts. I reconnected with my "self" – a self that had been suppressed within the walls of academia. (Student reflection)

*Expressive arts expanded students' sense of agency as knowledge producers, which in turn, strengthened their ability to critically reflect on their course learning.*

As the student quote relays, rather than positioning academic knowledge as something predominately intellectual and/or produced outside of them, the creative process became a vehicle to experience course knowledge as something more fully connected to and co-constructed by them. Students took greater ownership of, and placed more value on, their learning, which supported their agency and embodiment as knowers. The expressive arts were used to relay not only what they had learned but was engaged as a vehicle to articulate who they were and who they were becoming as individuals/professionals through their learning. This idea is reflected in my journal:

Again, another student shared her teaching is shifting; re: taking risks to incorporate arts strategies in her teaching; she found "it worked" re: led to "good class discussion," "curriculum more interesting," felt "more herself" as teacher/person because felt more "alive," "engaged"; I notice this shift in class too, students more animated; taking more risks to explore, express, think outside the box when we are engaging the curriculum via expressive arts pedagogies. (Instructor journal)

Through the creative process I observed many students become more playful, curious, energized and willing to take risks. This expanded agency accrued benefits of deepened engagement, presence and voice. I noted that students often expressed surprise at how involved they had become in this assignment because they felt so able to freely and creatively engage at both personal and academic levels, an integration, they indicated, not often made in their course work. Here I offer examples of how students' agency enhanced their critical reflection. Within the group work course, one group turned class members' individual reflections on their course learning into poetry. One poem read:

How hard it is  
to reveal shame  
to others.  
To be honest  
in front of witnesses.

Before that  
I was carrying  
a secret,  
and that secret  
kept me apart.

Speaking,  
I was free.

The above poem was created by reading a student's individual reflection carefully and repeatedly and then picking words and phrases in the text to create a poem. In another example, a student's paragraph-length reflection on the theme of silence within the group process read:

The importance and effectiveness of silence; being alone with your thoughts; digesting what events have taken place and developing meaning for yourself; it has taken a bit of getting used to, but I am now starting to appreciate the value of silence.

This paragraph was taken by one working group and turned into the poem below.

the importance  
and effectiveness  
of silence

Below, one working group member describes the creative process used to create these poems.

. . . using Richardson's (2000) tools of turning interviews into poetry, I honed the group members' own words into poems. I kept the words in the same order, and with the same meaning, only sculpting away lines to allow "rhythms, silences, spaces, breath points, alliterations, meter, cadence . . ." (Richardson, 2000, p. 933). For me, this compressed use of group members' reflections revealed powerfully and essentially their experience. . . . And it also gave our group a brief and emotionally vibrant way to experience this. . . . By placing words together that weren't there before, in new configurations, we "hear, see and feel the world in new dimensions" (Richardson, 2000, p. 933).

Hearing their peer's course learning in the form and cadence of poetry brought new levels of experience and meaning to students. One student reported feeling a sense of "sacredness" towards their individual/collective reflections; an experience of course learning she had never experienced or considered before. Another student responded to the poetry stating, "I could feel that in my body" which led to new class insights on poetry as a vehicle to "re-member" their reflections and foster more embodied knowing. Placing student reflections within knowledge-making landscapes of poetry created new critical insights. Just as the poem on silence revealed

the ability to speak volumes in a few words, so too, did students suddenly realize that it was the quality (not quantity) of silence which was important to emphasize as group leaders. This segued further into reflecting on the meanings of “quality” silence. Several students commented that having their course learning voiced through poetry would always stay with them, contrasting other learning experiences (such as lectures and exams) which, they said, were often soon forgotten. Another student added to this observation indicating this meant reflections on these experiences would also continue.

In the family course, a group of students (who were not singer/song writers) wrote and performed five songs reflecting on and shaking up their classmates' perspectives and reflections on family course theories (e.g., solution-focused, narrative). They saw music as a vehicle to make theory come alive, engaging and relevant, something they agreed was mostly missing in university coursework. Using hip hop, blues, pop and religious/spiritual musical genres, they created a diverse range of beats, rhythms and intonations, and wrote lyrics fitting these styles to try to give life and new perspectives to students' reflections. Their full-hearted performance of songs, combined with the insight and wit of their compositions, created a level of dynamic energy and unencumbered exploration among students I had not seen previously. Below is a rap song excerpt by “RUN DKC aka Snoop Diggy, Not So Little Kim, and Grand Master “C” (the rap name they gave themselves).

Now listen up gang this ain't no hocus pocus  
We about to get – solution focused  
**If your peeps are headed out for dysfunction**  
**You gonna need – social construction**  
Deep in under this kinda therapy  
There is a whole new – philosophy  
**The family's troubles aren't based on bad luck**  
**It might sound simple but they just go stuck**  
The whole conception- there's exception  
**Now wallowin' in trouble- that's just not dope**  
**This kinda talk instills real hope**  
Breaks the pattern see – builds resilience  
**Now you see youse got-to be detective**  
**Then you can see- other's perspective**

Below are excerpts from two of these group members' individual reflections on their creative process.

The learning has been insightful – complete with many “aha” moments and uproarious laughter. We've agreed that theory has usually been presented in an uninspiring manner. This class . . . through our songs and musical interpretation has juiced it up – made it real, tangible and useful . . . This experience got us thinking about our theoretical orientation. . . . We have pondered the reasons for our preference – the effects of popular culture, the influences of our educational institutions, mentors and life experiences. All in all, this has been a grand undertaking. I know I am still finding my way but the theoretical path is not nearly as long and winding anymore. (Student reflection)

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In dealing with everyone’s [class members’] responses, I made notes which helped me in the writing of my stanzas. I actually enjoyed creating my lyrics. . . . We discussed whether . . . we were truly being as encompassing as possible. We had fun integrating our work and trying out the lyrics using different musical styles. After rehearsing several times we sat down and had a serious chat, again, about why and how what we did was meaningful. Again, we discussed the implications of what we have discovered in class member reflections. (Student reflection)

Class members shared that the songs helped them to “get theory” on intuitive and sensory levels, something textbooks failed to offer. One student shared her new realization that theories are more than a collection of ideas and words, they also reflect particular rhythms and energies she could draw from to better engage and translate theory into practice. In experiencing theory through music, new discussion arose to include the influences of popular culture, life experience and the education system on their theoretical preferences. Students gained a more contextualized and politicized understanding of their relationship to theory as well as greater cognizance of their role as social actors in the enactment of theory. This in turn, led to a reassessment of their theoretical alignments and to a deeper consideration of which theory seemed most reflective of and appropriate for a given context.

### **Engaging greater complexity**

The “Whole ME” presented itself. KABOOM! My artistic side surfaced! Pencils, markers, paper, glue were put to work and I was in my element. Finally, an opportunity to incorporate some of my natural abilities presented itself. Techniques and skills that were not conducive to paper or examination writing were a welcomed sight. Before long, I was sketching metaphors and had group members pose and dress up. Their facial expressions and laughter validated their delight in the task I had carefully selected for them. Unsurprisingly, learning occurred simultaneously. (Student reflection)

*Expressive arts supported students to develop more complex understandings of their course learning by encouraging reflection from multiple perspectives and frames of knowing.*

Through their creative efforts students engaged their reflections not only from their intellectual knowledge but also from a range of subjectivities and forms of knowing (e.g., affective, somatic, intuitive, social, cultural and/or spiritual). This expanded voice brought forth new questions, connections and disjunctures which stretched, reframed and complicated their learning. Students spoke of “getting” an aspect of course material “at new levels” or of experiencing in a non-verbal way, that the whole of their learning, was becoming “more than the sum of its parts” resonating with Gude’s (2010) statement that art/art-making “embod[ies] a holistic complexity that is not reducible to the sum of the parts” (p. 34).

Many groups used symbolic and metaphoric images (e.g., quilts, gardens, labyrinths) as their creative containers to explore and express their learning. One group chose to create a digital tree because they felt its “familiar” metaphoric meanings (e.g., branches of learning) could be used to “affirm and disrupt” student learning and the field of group work. They also felt it was a symbol which invited “convergent and divergent” reflections which they deemed important for class dialogue. The group decided to construct a kind of genealogical mapping of group work concepts/themes from students’ history, perspectives and experience. Their choice, they indicated, invited re-examination of the dominant, expert-based genealogies which are neatly laid out in group work textbooks (and “showcased in tables of content”). While the

"genealogical trunk" for the field of group work was modernist theory, they stated, students placed the significance of postmodernism and complexity at the centre or "trunk" of their learning and identification. Class dialogue ensued regarding the meaning and implications of this reorientation. Relationships between course themes (implied by their arrangement on the tree) became explored using metaphorical, somatic and intuitive ways of knowing shifting the breadth of conversation and knowledge construction. Without prompting, several students found themselves speaking of the "trunks," "roots," "branches," "buds" and "leaves" of their course learning and how their particular "tree of understanding" would shape their professional practice and align (or conflict) with current maps of theory and practice in the field.

When some students shifted class deliberations to identify ways their course learning felt too "structured," "restricted" and/or "simplified" by this image, the presenting group showed no desire to disrupt this critique of the cartoon-like tree image they had created. One student reported realizing she experienced her course learning more like a kaleidoscope of interacting colours, shapes and sizes in constant change and movement. In connecting this metaphor to her experience as a teacher, intuitive and somatic forms of knowing were gleaned as she began to juxtapose the sense and feel of these kaleidoscopic dances (of her teaching and course learning). As stated by Mcfague, who is cited in Phipps (2010), metaphorical language "insists on taking along the whole human being in all its familiarity, messiness, and concreteness" (p. 49). At the end of this sharing, the presenting group added another layer of insight. They indicated they had intentionally chosen a one-dimensional cartoon-like digital image to cultivate a sense of uncertainty or discomfort in the class (i.e., to get students to experience that something was too simple and to wonder what was "real," like the image itself). Via their image, they were hoping to depict the constructed quality of the mapping exercise in the goal to make visible and question the very mapping process itself and the often taken-for-granted representations of knowledge constructed by theorists (and "canonized" in textbooks) and by ourselves. This added layer of meta-analysis or deconstruction ended the discussion with a valuable dose of loose ends, uncertainty and surprise.

Students used the arts to explore course learning through varied cultural perspectives. One group chose to create an Aboriginal medicine wheel after noticing that most student course reflections failed to highlight the multicultural and spiritual theories/themes of families. They pondered how "embedded as students we still are in white Western perspectives" and saw the medicine wheel as an opportunity to "challenge taken-for-granted assumptions in ourselves and the class." To do this, the group involved the class in re-examining the four course theories (which had been highlighted by students) through the lens of the medicine wheel's four directions (N, S, E, W) and representations of "mind, heart, spirit and body" and their inseparability. They asked the class, for example, to what extent do cognitive behavioural approaches to families address family members' "mind, heart, spirit and body"? What are the potential implications for the family when one or more facets are missing? Becoming a form of holistic assessment, the medicine wheel provided students with a new cultural context or knowledge system from which to better recognize what was truly lost when a theory highlighted the cognitive and/or emotive dimension of families while ignoring the somatic and/or spiritual elements. Normalized and assumed practices separating aspects of ourselves and our relations to others became reevaluated by students, as one student shared, "we often compartmentalize concepts, separate them and work on each individually in contrast to considering their connectedness." This student further stated that the exercise "resolved a stereotype I had about native cultures, that they are simplistic." Through visual and interactive engagement with the

medicine wheel she came to realize the "sophistication and complexity" of First Nations' ways of knowing stating, "I would have never have thought about this had it not been for this assignment."

Through discussion of the sacred teachings of the medicine wheel new areas of critical debate arose regarding the differences between the recognition, inclusion and integration of "mind, heart, spirit and body" within a theoretical approach; insights not previously ignited by students. New questions were raised, including, "Could I inject a spiritual facet within a cognitive-behavioral approach to family work or would the whole approach need to be transformed?" Students also seemed to reflect in a more honest and meaningful way on the influences of their cultural backgrounds in shaping their personal/professional frames of understanding and its potential impact on working with families from cultures different from their own.

### **Expressive Arts as Academic Work**

While my university career has enabled me to refine my intellectual and academic skills, I learned that my creative and artistic side has been neglected to a large degree. Participating in this novel experience has renewed my desire and courage to allow myself to stray from the norm and let my imagination combine with my intellectual pursuits. I have learned to value the uniqueness and diversity that I can add to my own creations. (Student reflection)

[After my meeting with my group] I couldn't help but notice how relaxed I was. I realized that I'd spent the last two hours laughing with two amazingly creative classmates, opening myself up enough to let my own imagination fly. We were each individuals with unique strengths and we know enough to work together to create something greater than each of our separate parts. What I have taken from working with them will last well beyond this course. (Student reflection)

In exploring ways student critical reflection could be enhanced, I became engaged in my own reflective process which led me to understanding expressive arts as a valuable facet of academic work. Expressive arts provided students openings to examine their course learning in ways traditional academic work does not afford. As Hotvedt (2001) describes, I too witnessed some students "master" course concepts via expressive arts in manner they had not done previously. So too, did I observe the interrelationality between students' multiple ways of knowing as inferred by Michelli (2005) and Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl (2006) and listened to numerous students report that their learning was becoming "more than the sum of its parts." I also noticed how students' critical reflection and creativity became increasingly inseparable as they critically explored "new and unique possibilities through imagination and creation" (Curzon-Hobson, 2003).

Students' enhanced learning became explicit through the diversity of questions, insights and connections that were made as they engaged in the translations and transformations of course learning into creative form and vice versa. Expressive arts brought to life multiple perspectives and assumptions on course material. Students' critical examination of their academic, professional and personal perspectives made them better able to contextualize their learning and observe its relation to broader societal contexts. They engaged in the interplays of reflection and action as they drew directly from their creative experiences as a means to further reflect on theoretical concepts. Drawing from Brockback & McGill's (1998) conceptualization of critically reflective learning as "that which enables the learner to engage in deep and transformatory

learning” (p. 79), the assignment became a vehicle for students to enter a multi-faceted terrain of learning – a terrain involving the interplay of creative, experiential, multi-modal and collaborative dimensions of learning. Identifying these multi-faceted dimensions of learning enhances understanding of how expressive arts can enhance student critical reflection in higher education.

As course instructor, I was buoyed in witnessing students’ rapport of questions and insight. I became increasingly aware that students’ projects became creative containers that helped them engage (a) the complexity (in its tensions, ambiguities and connections), and (b) the emergence (in its movement, change and unknowing) of learning in a manner that was challenging and meaningful for them. Students are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume and expectations within academic study. They can feel pressured to critique and disseminate their learning in prescriptive, tidy ways that fail to ignite their agency and creativity as learners. In being able to critique course learning through creative expression, knowledge construction became a more embodied journey attentive to the complexity of knowing.

In reflecting on this assignment, I have become further mindful of the importance of providing students with the kinds of supports and resources I outlined in my discussion of the planning and implementation of the assignment. My awareness has also been heightened with respect to actively acknowledging students’ different starting points on this creative journey and the importance of starting from where students are, both individually and collectively. Some students shared their feelings of initial intimidation by this non-traditional learning assessment, others expressed their curiosity and enthusiasm, while others assumed that it was simply a fun task, not genuine academic work. Regardless of viewpoint, critique of course learning through creative expression was a novel experience for students which ignited their agency as learners.

Expressive arts became an opening for many students to draw from areas of their learning strength (whether that be their love for and/or skill in poetry, visual art), creating opportunities for learning engagement they cited as very motivating. The majority of students, while identifying themselves as new to creative expression or as lacking creative "expertise" became intrigued to explore and express their learning in new ways. They often expressed being ready to try something different from their standard experience of academic learning. In particular for these latter students, the experiential and group focus of the assignment supported their willingness to engage in creative expression. Just as experiential learning has been viewed as involving the “creative” (Breunig, 2005), so too, expressive arts brought students to experiential learning through forms of direct, authentic experience (Lawrence, 2005; Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006) which proved to be very engaging for students. Expressive arts also lent itself to collaborative experiences of learning where meaning is co-constructed. “The enduring belief that . . . creativity is developed alone is largely a myth” (p. 176) state Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner (1999). Creativity is embedded in a social process and students repeatedly voiced the benefits they experienced in working collaboratively with peers. They were often inspired by their peers’ creativity and perspectives, felt supported and valued for their own contributions and enjoyed the process. In pooling their collective resources they were better equipped to successfully navigate the challenges, unknowing and messiness which are part and parcel of the creative process. Interestingly, students often passionately contrasted this creativity focused group experience with prior experiences of academic group work. They spoke of there being a lack of competitiveness, an equitable sharing of effort and workload and of being surprised to notice, how at some point, they had stopped focusing on their grade because they had become immersed in the learning experience itself. From what I witnessed, it seemed

to be an experience where students were able to surprise themselves and one another. These kinds of benefits are worthy of further exploration.

Using expressive arts to assess and translate learning proved valuable. This dual engagement created an inquiry experience which strengthened students’ understanding of the complexities and possibilities of critical reflection. Over time I came to appreciate the value of integrating (as opposed to adding on) expressive arts into course objectives, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. By explicitly articulating expressive arts’ relation to course objectives, and by also allowing the arts and its ways of knowing the ability to alter and/or to transform the course objectives and outcomes themselves, students’ willingness and capacities to engage this form of academic work were strengthened. When integrated into the curriculum, conditions conducive to expressive arts learning became further prioritized by myself and students, such as creating a safe learning environment, valuing multi-modal learning, and providing time and resources to support this academic work.

In the classic text, *Visual Thinking*, Arnheim expressed the poignant need for visual thinking in higher education, stating:

In fact, educators and administrators cannot justify giving the arts an important position in curriculum unless they understand that the arts are the most powerful means of strengthening the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in any field of endeavor. The neglect of the arts is only the most tangible symptom of the widespread unemployment of the senses in every field of academic study. What is most needed is not more aesthetics or more esoteric manuals of art education but a convincing case made for visual thinking quite in general (Arnheim, 1969, p.3).

Quoting Merleau-Ponty’s statement that “mental life is porous, open to air and light” (p. 51), Phipps (2010), among other scholars, continue to assert the value of “critical, creative” practice in higher education stating, “And so, against the erosion of air and space, the future university, as an aired university, might recommit to blue skies thinking in the pattern of a spacious, gracious commitment to embodied critical, creative elemental practice” (Phipps, 2010, p. 51).

When positioned as a valuable aspect of academic work, the expressive arts ignite a range of possibilities for engagement within teaching and learning contexts. However, in designing an expressive arts assignment I was mindful of being responsible to work within the scope of my own knowledge and experience of the arts as a non-arts-based instructor. I realized the importance of becoming aware of the connections between creativity and critical reflection to ground my intention. I drew from my experience using expressive arts activities in class and the ways I witnessed forms of student multi-modal engagement. I became better informed on the challenges of the creative process and ways to offer students support before initiating the assignment. In the design, implementation and evaluation of the assignment I gave concerted consideration to students’ abilities and comfort levels related to the arts. Within the strengths and limitations of this context, I am pleased that meaningful engagement occurred which enhanced students’ capacities for critical reflection on course learning. I am further buoyed by the realization that the expressive power of students’ creative work (and its impact on their learning) will be further strengthened as I become more skilled and knowledgeable in using expressive arts in my courses. In doing so, I am able to imagine the on-going development of this assignment to further ignite rich, meaningful arts-informed learning for students.

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