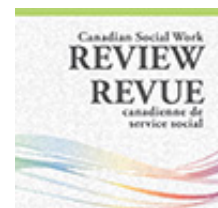


## Canadian Social Work Review Revue canadienne de service social



# TAPESTRIES OF CREATIVITY: PRIVILEGE, OPPRESSION, AND DISCOMFORTING EMOTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

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### Article abstract

The front-line people skills and interventions that social workers use are shaped by their personal experiences of race, culture, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, ability and disability, and religion and spirituality, as well as by the specific time and geopolitical contexts in which they practice. Social workers are taught to identify and be cognizant of these aspects of their social location when they are BSW students. In this regard, they submit papers and deliver presentations designed to demonstrate their reflexivity and ability to integrate theory into practice. However, these evaluations do not adequately capture how their learning influences them as emergent professionals. Creativity and artwork transcend traditional academic learning by engaging the senses in ways that personalize each student's learning experience while supporting their fellow learners. As such, the focus of creative social work education is directed at both the process of creativity and the product of that process, namely the creation. Using a transformative learning lens, this research examined how BSW students incorporated their creative expressions in the classroom, as a process toward using self-reflexivity as a skill to further their transformative learning about social justice.

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**Abstract:** The front-line people skills and interventions that social workers use are shaped by their personal experiences of race, culture, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, ability and disability, and religion and spirituality, as well as by the specific time and geopolitical contexts in which they practice. Social workers are taught to identify and be cognizant of these aspects of their social location when they are BSW students. In this regard, they submit papers and deliver presentations designed to demonstrate their reflexivity and ability to integrate theory into practice. However, these evaluations do not adequately capture how their learning influences them as emergent professionals. Creativity and artwork transcend traditional academic learning by engaging the senses in ways that personalize each student's learning experience while supporting their fellow learners. As such, the focus of creative social work education is directed at both the process of creativity and the product of that process, namely the creation. Using a

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transformative learning lens, this research examined how BSW students incorporated their creative expressions in the classroom, as a process toward using self-reflexivity as a skill to further their transformative learning about social justice.

**Keywords:** social work education; transformative education; arts-based learning; reflective learning; creativity, social justice

**Abstré :** Les compétences relationnelles et les interventions de première ligne utilisées par les travailleurs sociaux sont formées autour de leurs expériences personnelles en matière de race, de sexe, de statut socio-économique, de religion et de spiritualité, d'orientation sexuelle, d'expression de genre, de capacité et de handicap, de culture et d'époque spécifique, ainsi que de contextes géopolitiques. Les travailleurs sociaux apprennent à identifier et à être conscients de ces aspects de leur situation sociale lorsqu'ils sont étudiants en B.T.S. À cet égard, ils soumettent des articles et des présentations destinés à démontrer leur réflexivité et leur capacité à intégrer la théorie dans la pratique. Cependant, ces évaluations ne rendent pas compte de manière adéquate de la façon dont l'apprentissage les influence en tant que professionnels émergents. La créativité et l'art transcendent l'apprentissage académique traditionnel en faisant appel aux sens de manière à personnaliser l'expérience d'apprentissage de chaque élève et à soutenir les autres apprenants. En tant que telle, la formation en travail social créatif se concentre à la fois sur le processus de créativité et sur le produit de ce processus, à savoir la création. En utilisant une perspective d'apprentissage transformateur, cette recherche a examiné comment les étudiants en B.T.S ont intégré leurs expressions créatives en classe, comme un processus visant à utiliser l'autoréflexivité comme compétence pour approfondir leur apprentissage transformateur sur la justice sociale.

**Mots-clés :** formation en travail social; éducation transformatrice; l'apprentissage basé sur les arts; apprentissage réflexif; créativité, justice sociale

THIS RESEARCH PAPER EXPLORES THE USE of arts-based methods in a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) classroom to promote critical reflexivity to assist students to connect theory to practice, and to dig deeper in understanding what they bring to their practice. Social work's commitment to justice requires coursework designed to explore and encourage reflexivity. Such engagement supports the professional practice of social justice to mitigate biases from workers' privileges and experiences of oppression as well as privilege. Literature about using arts-based teaching in social work education (Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015; Chambon, 2009; Coholic et al., 2009; Goitom, 2020; McGuire & Lay,

2020; Jacobs, 2023) refers to students' felt experiences that engage deep levels of meaning-making — levels deeper than those accessible through reflection papers. However, the literature falls short of articulating the learning processes that students encounter as they tie art to reflexivity. Arts-based assignments assist in expanding the toolkit available to educators to teach, in a meaningful way, complex and abstract concepts such as social justice and critical social work practice. Such methods can surface rich opportunities for transformational growth, learning, imagination, and creativity (Eisner, 2005; Greene, 1995). These opportunities then tap into active and teacher-guided reflexive practices that go beyond the cognition normally captured in papers and presentations, as they engage deeply felt experiences.

This study is salient, given the polarizing forces and injustices that social work students encounter in practice. These factors risk entrenching social work education and practice in neoliberal ideologies that reinscribe linear ways of working with clients, which in turn diminish each client's voice and their participation. To interrogate the profession's connections to relations of power, and to advance an understanding of justice, social work educators regularly emphasize reflexivity. While reflexivity is not endemic to social work alone (Houston, 2015), the profession actively incorporates the integration of self, cognition, and emotion (D'Cruz et. al, 2007) to how knowledge is constructed (Taylor & White, 2000) and how power shapes subjective experiences (Butler et al., 2007). Arts-based pedagogies add further nuance to reflexive practices to support students as they interrogate how they create knowledge by connecting their subjectivities, positionalities, lived experiences, and relational work, to their understandings of various levels of power structures (Clarke, 2023). This study therefore challenges the risks associated with perpetuating neoliberal ways of teaching, learning, and practicing social work by deploying arts-based methods to engage students in a nuanced way to draw on felt experience of power and intersectionality to understand the implications for social justice practice.

## **Transformative Learning Using the Arts in Social Work Education**

### *The Traditions of the Banking Model and Reflection*

Traditional approaches to education tend to be linear and based on Freire's (1970) banking model, in which students pursue questions largely based on a teacher or textbook (Sleeter, 2004). The banking model relies on an inherited tradition of knowledge replete with dominant discourses (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014), resulting in learning and teaching becoming embedded in re-inscription concepts like 'safety' and 'comfort' (Arao & Clemens, 2013) and an uncritical examination of one's place in their learning (Bransford, 2011).

A diverse range of scholars from Canada and beyond have introduced reflective practices in social work. Schön (1987) introduced reflection as a tool to develop practice-related assumptions in professional practice. This sort of experiential orientation in adult education was first discussed by Freire (1970), Mezirow (1991), and Brookfield (1993), the latter of whom introduced the notion of emancipation through reflective practice. In this regard, many assignments indeed engage students' self-awareness, practice reflections, and considerations about their growth and development (Chan & Lee, 2021). Usually, such reflections are in the form of presentations and written assignments that require students to link their sense of self to their practice, and that fit within task-focused competencies which are positivistic in nature (Bogoet et al., 2011). These reflections align with the traditional banking model (Freire, 1970) without adequately capturing additional nuance around transformative learning.

### *A Shift towards Transformative Learning*

To address this inadequacy, Freire (1970) suggests conscientization, whereby students critically examine their social realities and positionality while considering how these factors shape their actions. Yet, the engagement remains within the limits of reflective practice, because this exploration stays safely within an understanding of how one constructs the world and their place in it (Fook & Askeland, 2007; Heron, 2005). Thus, explorations regarding positionality remain similarly reflective, in the context of learning about the profession (Glisczinski, 2007). This dynamic between understanding and engagement falls in the realm of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), the main processes of which involve disorienting experiences, critical reflection, rational dialogue, and action (Herbers, 1998). To encourage students toward conscientization and social justice education, some educators use transformative learning approaches to challenge the norms perpetuated by the dominant culture. The reflective dialogue, a key process in conscientization (Sleeter, 2004), draws upon a scaffolding approach (Vygotsky, 1978) in which students learn as they engage in tasks and interact with one another. The concern is that the learning stays reflective and touches issues around positionality only in a peripheral way.

### *Using Reflexivity in Social Work Education*

Knowledge of the self and reflexivity are core values of professional practice (CASW, 2024). The foundation for this reflection begins in the social work classroom, requiring educators to employ non-traditional teaching and evaluation methods to facilitate transformative learning. Freire viewed education as engaging in a relational understanding of self, others, and the world (Morris, 2008). Social work curricula also emphasize the positionality or social location of workers alongside the

casework approach to practice (Bransford, 2011; Pease et al., 2016; Seymour, 2015). This emphasis acknowledges that positionality creates unequal power relations, promoting an understanding of personal and professional privilege so that workers become aware of how their actions might further oppress the people they serve. We think of developing a foundational reflexive skill as a social justice component that can be developed and enhanced in education (Goitom, 2020). Therefore, engaging students in this exploration requires teachers to model this self-awareness and the applications to practice.

Social work education nurtures a student's ability to develop reflexive practices going beyond reflective models to areas that challenge learners to delve into how knowledge is constructed and how power relations manifest in a neoliberal world. Such efforts also invite students to interrogate their own positions within locations of power and powerlessness to develop practice reflexivity (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000b, Taylor & White, 2000). While such reflexive explorations do indeed take place in the classroom and in assignments, narratives of student 'safety' and 'comfort' preclude any deep or long-standing explorations of the tensions that emanate from the work of reflexivity; their learning thus remains in the familiar and self-indulgent territory of reflection. Current mainstream approaches to teaching and learning do not adequately capture transformative learning in the social work classroom; however, by using arts-based teaching methods, educators can facilitate students' cognitive and affective capacities, utilizing creativity in problem-solving through engaging with emotions, culture, and subjectivity (Moxley et al., 2012; Spencer, 2012; Tsang, 2013).

### *Arts-Based Methods to Deepen Engagement*

There is much scholarship about the use of arts-based pedagogy in postsecondary education in a range of disciplines (Hunter & Frawley, 2023; Mirmiran, et al., 2023), and the term 'art' is used broadly to include any form of creative expression. Arts-based teaching practices also reflect the value of inherent Indigenous ways of being and provide all students with an approach to decolonizing social work education (Bequette, 2014, Tabor et al., 2023). Arts-based education has numerous positive effects on learning: "[a] canvas, a sculpture, a melody or a poem can be excellent teaching resources if used appropriately in the classroom due to their interdisciplinary potential" (UNESCO, 2022 para. 2). Poetry nurtures empathy and intense feelings in an audience (Eisner, 2008; Foster, 2012). Creative play draws upon symbolism and metaphors (Ayling, 2012) to which people can engage relationally. Music inspires calm, empowerment, and connectedness (Maschi & Bradley, 2010). Drama elicits a visceral and immediate response by an audience to what the actors portray and deliver (Walton, 2012). Graffiti furthers critical awareness (Mega, 2022)

of social problems and voicelessness, and promotes social activism and justice to challenge the dominant sociopolitical commentary (Choi, 2020; Mardirosian et al., 2009, Waldner & Dobratz, 2013). The arts therefore offer a method to give a nuanced voice to lived experiences, a way to have conversations with one's environment, and a format to engage with notions that are difficult to articulate linguistically (Raingruber, 2004). Into the classroom, arts-based mediums provide students the freedom to explore their values, beliefs, and understandings of the world (Greene, 1995) to develop critical consciousness that deepens dialogue (Freire, 1993, p. 77) based on expressions that go beyond authoring a paper and delivering a presentation.

For social work students to uncover their identities, become critically conscious about their power, and understand the issues of social justice, they need to engage in deep and sustained exploration — especially in the current era of polarized thought and action. Artistic creative expressions provide opportunities for students explore “beyond the boundaries ... to enhance learning” (hooks, 1994 p. 10) and to tap into spaces and places that go beyond those in which written language results in lapses in complication and articulation. To support students' exploration and expansion of their understanding of their place in the world, arts-based methodologies begin with a foundational awareness of how to create practices that are socially just (Worth, 2024) and to hear “engaged voices that are never fixed and absolute and always changing, always evolving” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). Creative arts therefore encourage students to exemplify nuanced ways to tap into these ever-evolving intersections as they develop a professional persona that combines elements of personal self-identity, social work practice values, and knowledge of their power (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; Milbrandt, 2010). Marcuse (1978) firmly believed in the transformative power of the arts in the lives of individuals and society. While the promotion of art in the western world is based in a narrow understanding that largely upholds products of empire building, colonization, and oppression (Bailey, 2020), the flexibility of creating art provides an ongoing voice that informs and transforms issues of identity, reflexivity, and justice.

The use of artistic mediums in teaching and research is not new to social work (Foster, 2016; Keddell, 2011; Walton, 2012). Arts-based teaching about diversity and social justice helps convey subtleties, complexities, and emotions that are difficult to capture through abstract lectures and case examples (Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015; Witkin, 2014). Taylor and White (2006) contend that alternate forms of developing knowledge can encourage “compassionate engagement” (p. 949) with the world. In this regard, arts-based pedagogies engage students in an empathetic way towards the links between 1) client life experiences, 2) social justice issues, and 3) students' own emotions. This approach reminds educators and learners that people's lives are unique



and often do not fit amenably within examinations of grand theories (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000b) that are common in social work classrooms.

Concurrent teaching and learning methods need to further capture transformative learning in the social work classroom. Utilizing arts-based approaches can thus facilitate students' cognitive and affective capacities, while engaging their creativity in problem-solving (Moxley et al 2012; Spencer, 2012; Tsang, 2013). What such an approach requires, however, is a sustained reflexive pedagogy, expressed through art, that consistently and constantly engages student learning via their emotions, cultures, and subjectivities.

The arts provide a vehicle through which students can experience an emotional shift in their learning and professional development — a necessary precursor to reflexivity (Keddell, 2011). Marcuse (1978) stated, "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the [individuals] who could change the world" (p. 32–33). In the context of a polarized world, an increasing emphasis on neoliberal practices, and worsening conditions for marginalized people, art returns us to voicing experiences, evoking compassion, and generating conscientious justice practices. The gap created by just reflective work can therefore be filled through sustained reflexive practices using art as the conduit. It is in this spirit that we approach this current study.

## Methodology

This exploratory study analyzed the use of an arts-based assignment in a course focused on diversity and anti-oppression, comprising two sections (each with different instructors) of fourth-year BSW students. Students were required to create, present, and then write a reflection on an arts-based product that depicted their learning process, engagement, and reflexivity in the course. The written portion was designed to help students be deeply reflexive as they discussed the meanings behind their art while engaging in course themes such as oppression, empowerment, reflexivity, use of self, and positionality.

### *Contextual Framework*

We, as instructors, used a constructivist education approach (Ackermann, 2001) to deliver this course, which explored the understanding of oppression, privilege, power, and reflexivity by engaging students in art-based activities and assignments. The arts-based assignment specifically reflected constructivist principles, which, according to Lee and Greene (2004), inform transformative learning. Further, the assignment itself was based on the constructivist idea that learning is shaped by how we construct our sense of reality based on lived experiences, use of language, and interactions with others (Blunt-Williams et al., 2011; Lee, 1996).



As instructors and authors, our positionality and subjectivity are critical in teaching and research. We offer a combined statement of how we understand ourselves in our teaching and the context of this study. We (Clarke & Dutta) were hired by a small school of social work in Ontario to teach separate sections of a course on diversity, anti-oppression, and social work. At the time, we were employed as contract lecturers. We are interested in the cognitive and affective processes and learning outcomes that arise when social work students explore reflexive practice. As instructors, we are interested in facilitating students' exploration of privilege and oppression as they relate to their practice. We make use of experiential exercises to urge students out of their comfort zones to move to felt experiences of learning that challenge their emotions and thoughts.

We come to teaching with a combined 50-plus years of practice experience that span the dimensions of micro- to macro-practice. We have practiced in neighbourhoods and communities, intermediate and secondary schools, and in Indigenous communities, with foci ranging from administration to child welfare, family preservation, violence prevention, group work, and work with local and federal governments. Our individual and shared histories mean that we understand the particularities of individuals' lived experiences and positionalities, while we ourselves have experienced and witnessed the process and outcomes of inequities in our own lives and those with whom we work. It is with this understanding that we approach this research with a critical postmodern lens, which recognizes different ways of knowing (Fook, 2003), raises new questions about power inherent in practicing social work, and compels us to find meaning as we unpack underlying assumptions about teaching, learning, and social work practice.

In the course, all PowerPoint slides, materials, and assignments were the same for both sections. However, the delivery of the information was nuanced by each classroom environment and our different engagement styles. Within the 12-week course, we combined classes four times to co-teach and, on one occasion, exchange sections. One of us (Clarke) favoured examining issues from a structural perspective, while the other (Dutta) spoke more from an interpersonal lens. Teaching from both perspectives gave students a balanced approach to demonstrate the tensions between macro- and micro-levels of practice while simultaneously exploring skills need to bridge this gap.

We are both racialized persons of colour; one of us identifies as a lesbian, and the other as straight. We are both in our fifties. One of us has taught full-time in a permanent position in another educational setting for just over 20 years, while the other has maintained various contracts in education over the last 18 years. One of us went through formal social work education earlier in life, but we both have practiced in the field since our later teens. We both engaged in PhD programs in social work later in life, which we completed in 2018 and 2023 respectively.

*Research Questions*

This study is contextualized by several claims, as reflected above. First, creativity allows for the expression of experiences otherwise difficult to articulate in language. Second, creative expressions of learning facilitate a deep engagement regarding self, professionalism, and social justice issues. Third, creative methods personalize learning and increase sharing among learners. The objective of the study is to fill the gap that we see in social work education created by a seemingly perfunctory grasp of reflexivity in teaching social work that risks resorting to the comfort and safety associated with reflection. We believe that remaining in reflection only perpetuates complacency in social work. As such, we evaluate the sustained utility of arts-based expressions in social work classrooms to explore non-traditional experiences of transformative learning. The questions driving this pilot study were:

1. What role do creativity and art-form play in the transformative learning experiences of social work students?
2. In what ways does creativity provide additional expressions of learning that go beyond traditional papers and presentations?
3. How do social work students interpret the symbolism and significance of their creative learning expressions?

*Study Design*

At the start of the course, students were informed about their final assignment, part of which could be voluntarily submitted toward our research endeavour. Students who consented to participate, in line with the process described below, submitted their creations and their written reflections for inclusion in this study. The written component of students' assignments was analyzed using a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988). We utilized a three-dimensional narrative inquiry exploring interaction, continuity, and situation (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Issues of interaction focused this study on the relationship between us as teachers and our students, as well as the interactions between students. Continuity is a temporal issue, and this study was time-specific by examining the transformative learning that took place throughout the course, culminating in the arts-based presentations and subsequent reflection papers. Situation, the third dimension, explored the implications for the students' professional practice as social workers.

*Sampling*

We used convenience sampling methods, as students already engaged in the classroom volunteered to participate. Informed consent was distributed via the online learning platform. Students provided informed

consent to the use of their creative expression and of quotations from their reflections for this study. To reduce potential bias resulting from classroom experiences, consent forms of participants were collected by a third party to whom we were not privy until final course grades were finalized and submitted. At the time of grading, the instructors did not know who consented to participate, which further minimized bias in grading.

### *Ethics Approval*

The study received Institutional Research Board approval. As such, the study complied with the Tri-Council Policy Statement for the ethical conduct for research involving humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). All identifying participant information was treated as confidential through pseudonyms. Any artwork submitted for the study and associated reflections containing participants' names were stored on the university's password-protected, encrypted, cloud-based data management system, but were separated from consent forms. Participants provided paper-based consent forms (signed prior to the start of the research), which were stored in a locked cabinet. While participants were asked to provide a pseudonym, we explained that anonymity could not be guaranteed, given the subjective nature of the reflections and classroom discussions. Participants were informed of the benefits of the research to themselves, social work scholarship, and professional practice. The participants were advised of the dissemination processes of the findings including the use of their arts-based creative expressions and written quotes.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

Sixty BSW students were enrolled in this course, with 30 students in each section. Students were registered full-time, with an age range between 22 and 60, with the average age of students less than 30 years old. While the class was predominantly white, six students identified as racialized. Four self-identified as 2SLGBTQIA+. All students had an undergraduate degree and several prerequisite social work courses before their admission into this one-year (10-month) BSW program. While all students completed and presented their arts-based creations and submitted a reflection paper, 19 students consented for their creation and reflection to be used in this study.

Upon data analysis, we were struck by the richness and nuance of students' explorations through their learning. The constant dynamic movement between self, coursework, professional development, and creative expression suggested a transcendence of professional – personal understanding and the beginnings of a reasonably well-grounded

understanding of reflexivity. Our objective was to evaluate the utility of arts-based assignments in the classroom while also exploring the experience of creating art as a transformative learning experience, and two main themes emerged from our review of these assignments. The first theme, “Knowing Self, Knowing Others,” explores how students’ social location intersects with their professional selves and aligns with our objective to examine the utility of arts-based research. The second theme, “Privilege, Oppression, and Discomforting Emotions,” explores the experience of students reflexively engaging with arts-based learning.

### *Knowing Self, Knowing Others*

Through the process of using art to explore learning within the classroom, students began to develop an awareness that their identities were complex and were located within specific contexts and cultures. This awareness led them to explore their own social location and its implications for their professional selves. The art reflected moving back and forth between the personal and professional selves, while also trying to understand the complexity and the collaborative nature of identity.



I've always been fascinated by trees, especially branches. Growing up with various adversities, I found comfort and solace when being around trees. Thus, I placed twigs I found [in] a forest unto this canvas. These twigs are to resemble my continuous and ongoing journey to learn, and broaden my vision in social work. This means that my ability to learn, collaborate, and connect with the people in this field is continuously growing and intertwined. (Sora)

Sora speaks of the realization that learning professionally and personally is a process that can be engaged throughout the scope of one's career and life. Connecting with others is a way by which students are better able to understand themselves.

Students also depicted the wholeness of identity as a collection of the various parts of the self. Some, like Sarah, focused on their own social location:



Surrounding the silhouette is a mix match of puzzle pieces. Each piece represents a section of my diverse self-identity and in part, my social location. It can represent my thoughts, beliefs, or biases, all that make me who I am and I take with me throughout my life. (Sarah)

This reflection positions Sarah at the beginning of the reflexive process.

Other students extended into critical reflections or reflexivity, which helped them consider the impact of their social locations on the individuals they serve in the field. Joshua explains discovering the importance of social location as he exited police foundations and began the BSW:

My dream of becoming a police officer was cut short ... I felt a growing notion of panic and realized that although I would yield a considerable amount of power to good by others, I knew that this power could have the ability to corrupt me and make me view people in a way in which I didn't want to live. The textbooks that were provided to us portrayed Indigenous and Black populations as criminal deviants that represented a large inmate populous and continued to constitute the cultural "other" within the unification of Canadian values and beliefs. I felt as if I was being bonded by ropes, unable to express exactly how I felt. I was no longer surrounded by my peers but surrounded by the individuals in which I felt caused more harm than good. (Joshua)

Joshua signalled a shift in his thinking that helped him view "others" in a way that aligned with his thinking and values but broke away from the "traditional" teaching from the textbook used. This change stands in

contrast to the traditional methods of classroom discussions to depict client social locations using eco-maps, genograms, or other traditional system-related depictions.

Students indicated a challenge to the 'sameness' of these traditional approaches toward one that valued difference and uniqueness, but this movement went beyond binary notions of identities.

For me, postage stamps tell a story. In my artistic piece I have displayed the world as a circle filled with a wide variety of postage stamps from a wide variety of countries. The specific stamps I have chosen can teach us about a country's diversity and the oppression and challenges that certain groups have faced historically and presently. Some stamps document specific historical social movements that continue today. Through this creative piece I was attempting to display the fact that although we are a huge world containing many different diverse peoples and cultures, many of us support the same causes. (Mary)

As students presented their creations and narrated their reflections, they demonstrated an understanding of the complexity of the self, which in turn allowed them a different view of their own self, but also the ability to view others holistically. As students were able to explore and hold their own identities, they simultaneously were able to explore and hold space for the identities of the individuals with whom they worked.



Small wooden blocks aligned in a rectangle were chosen [by me] to represent people for a variety of reasons. Each individual block has a unique pattern on it, demonstrating innate diversity among people. The way they are classified, whether it be by colour, pattern, or another characteristic, is determined by the observer. This represents how people are not inherently more powerful than others, but that society creates categories in which people are placed. Despite these differences, the blocks are all made of the same material and are the same cubic shape. This serves



to represent that even though there are differences among individuals there are also similarities — we are all human. (Rachelle)

Rachelle's reflection on her artwork highlights how viewing ourselves from a reflexive perspective enables us to view others with the same reflexivity, leading us to recognize noticeable differences and many similarities between individuals. Students utilized the artistic process to explore their identities, which led to a more expanded view of others.

In sum, the process of “knowing self, knowing others” that our students depicted in their art illuminates their processes as they navigate getting to know a deeper version of themselves while also making sense of people around them. The use of artistic expressions conveys imagery that depicts this navigation as students put words to their art, thereby giving voice to a deep exploration of self, profession, and others. These areas of reflection then give rise to areas of a beginning or even intermediate reflexivity by focusing on the tensions between the power of the professional with the vulnerability of the person (in this case, the student) underlying that professional.

### *Privilege, Oppression, and Discomforting Emotions*

This second theme expanded our understanding of students' experience of art-based assignments and evaluations in social work education: they felt discomfort by the requirement to engage in a creative process. Simultaneously, the course content encouraged reflexivity, which also provoked feelings of vulnerability.

Some of my feelings that came about include: anger, happiness and hope. Most of my anger stemmed from the negative stereotypes Indigenous [P]eople still experience. Furthermore, my feelings of happiness came from the great initiatives being done by individuals who have been oppressed (i.e., speaking up about being sexually assaulted). Lastly, my feelings of hope came from the many ways social workers can help in mitigating oppression (i.e., challenging misconceptions). (Lisa)

Given that learners were being evaluated on their work, they struggled with how much to disclose.

At first I was very bitter about this assignment. I thought that it was not an appropriate assignment as we were being 'forced' to be creative. Something that I realized early on in the writing process of my spoken word piece was how invigorating this process can be. I wrote it in a moment of passion at one o'clock in the morning when I could not sleep. What I found after I was done was how calm I felt — anxiety[-]free almost. It turned into a very emotional process for me. An opportunity to put my feelings on paper while relating it to the oppression I have felt in the past couple of years in relation to my anxiety. (Becca)



The contradictory emotions — anger and hope, and feeling invigorated — speak to the vulnerability and reluctance that students feel when they are ‘forced’ to reveal private realms of their lives. In our teaching, we informed the students that they could say as little, or as much, as they wanted. We situated the experience of the creation and reflection — and much of the course — in the context of appreciating this kind of reflection as a process of easing into discomfort. We emphasized that the discomfort that students felt around self-disclosure was not much different from what clients experience when they seek service from social workers. Further, the process of learning about oppression and empowerment is an inherent challenge, as students confront their own experiences of privilege, acts of oppressive behaviour, and ways in which they have been marginalized.

I have been grappling with pushing myself to really grasp by values, biases, perspective, and implications of my social location through this course. This is not a new practice for me, but within the environment and framework of this course, I have felt inspired to push further, to seek out discomfort, and explore personal meaning. In this exercise, I have turned my focus to past experiences that I have developed scripts for their presentation, their meaning, and their value as formative events. This has led me to re-examine the scripts I have crafted that have not challenged my self-perception, especially those that keep me comfortable. At times I have felt at a total loss of how to explore meaning, or what implications my reflective practice would have going forward, but I have been committed to this pursuit, as I know I have much learning still to do. (Holly)

Holly spoke to the process of reflexivity leading her to further seek out discomfort in order to further knowledge and facilitate reflective processes, a common theme amongst our student participants. We reminded students that, while they raised concerns about equitable grading, our clients cope with a lack of access to life resources — food, shelter, safety, and so on. In other words, while the feelings around vulnerability and discomfort were described as similar for students, the consequences for students were simply not the same as the consequences for their clients. As such, we commended students for easing themselves into discomfort so that they could recognize, at a far deeper level, the importance of their power over clients.

Throughout the course I had many breakthroughs and personal growth with the material and how I understand privilege and oppression. This learning also had me frustrated with myself when I saw many of my classmates interacting in a positive manner with the material and myself doubting and questioning it as well as myself. “Is it the material?” “Is it my classmates?” “Is it just me?” “What is it that is causing these emotions?” were questions that came up a lot for me. Now after all of those questions

floating around in my head[,] they are not disappearing but to keep me sane I have begun to take the approach of having more self-tolerance and understanding. (Jennifer)

Jennifer's statement reflects many students, who noted having to deal with their "inner voices," exploring their selves, experiencing the discomfort of the process, and feeling more equipped to reflect and work through issues of privilege and oppression. This process of learning speaks to working with students to "learn through their feelings of discomfort" (Wong, 2018).

In the theme "Privilege, Oppression and Discomforting Emotions," as can be seen through these reflections, it is the process of 'discomforting' that we see an intentional engagement in which students express initial emotions about entering this sort of assignment, experience disorientation, describe their difficult feelings, and then recognize the parallel yet incongruent processes that clients experience. Learners demonstrate a reflexivity that, through art and written reflection, is engaged, consistent, and persistent. It is this through reflexive process that students face uncomfortable places of their own power and positionality and become increasingly sensitized to the polarizing world around them and the true impact on clients.

## Discussion

Social work pedagogy has increasingly focused on social justice, transformative practice, and anti-oppressive frameworks (Mullaly & West, 2018). However, the teaching of these approaches, until recently, has remained rooted in the traditional banking model (Freire, 1970), in which experts teach novices, who then — much like experts — reflect, but stop short of deep, sustained engagement. Such approaches to teaching certainly touch on critical ideas and practices, but are not completely congruent with transformative practice. This study illustrated that the nuances of learning are deepened using arts-based pedagogies, toward greater and somewhat more sustained reflexivity. Traditional, expert – novice, instructor – student models ignore the reflexivity required in social work education and practice, while currently, most reflexive exercises and assignments engage learners in some reflexive work. However, these fall short of a full, holistic felt understanding of reflexivity. These traditional methods therefore further a disjointed teaching method that models social work practices which serve to ultimately 'other' the people that we aim to serve by marginalizing and perhaps even exploiting them. This arts-based study went further than traditional teaching approaches to engage up-and-coming professionals in a somewhat more prolonged way as they thought about, created, presented, and reflected upon their own creation of a course based on structural practice and social justice work.

The study adds to the literature on the need for reflexivity, compassion, and social justice within the capacity of social work classroom. We aimed to exemplify how transformative learning through the arts is a powerful vehicle through which students can authentically internalize reflexive practice as a tool to contextualize their relationship with power, powerlessness, professional practice, and social justice work.

The reflexive authenticity exemplified in this research necessitated a process of vulnerability, better expressed through artistic expression. While traditional reflection papers and presentations are helpful to sensitize learners about the importance of thinking about practice and the impact on the professional, reflexive work requires more nuance. Papers and presentations certainly provide a legitimate and valued forum for this exploration. However, it is the linearity and rational approach of these papers and presentations that interrupt the full extent of reflexive thinking. Arts-based assignments provide additional layers to engage learners in the discomfort necessary to engage authentically in reflexive practice. The level of emotional engagement is heightened and deepened through an artistic or creative endeavour that solicits additional depth and nuance that can only add more reflexive content and context to written reflections.

In our study, students explored their shifting identities and social realities and the implications for their knowledge bases for their lived contexts (Fook & Askeland, 2007; Kanemoto, 2020). To varying degrees, students connected the interpersonal to the structural in their reflections (Mullaly & West, 2018). Huss et al. (2016) point out that “art makes visible the students’ emotional and cognitive understandings of social problems — firstly, to themselves, as a type of inner confrontation or dialogue, and secondly, to others” (p. 215). This visibility allows students to see both the forest and the trees by making connections between their lived experiences and positionalities, in tandem with the relations and the structural inequalities faced by those who are vulnerable and marginalized. This understanding therefore becomes fundamental to a stronger understanding of how they can use their positional power with humility in their social work roles to further social justice.

When students discussed the intersections of their oppressions and privileges, the back-and-forth dialogue with themselves reflected an ongoing mental activity of reflexive musical chairs. This mental activity challenged their previously held notions of mainstream social work before this course (Fook, 2016). Students engaged in a journey of digging deep, which required them to risk discomfort and emotional vulnerability. As they presented their creations and provided their reflections, we saw indications of compassionate engagement with classroom material (Taylor & White, 2006), and we trust, by extension, to their emerging professional practice.

The use of creativity and arts-based expressions provided students with the opportunity to make connections between the head and the heart. Their creations became the medium through which specific learnings surface, which — without opportunities for creative expression — would have remained invisible and unprocessed. The students' creative expressions tapped into the unspoken narratives that can remain hidden and inarticulate, and conversely assisted them to find their voice or a way to speak their truth. Students reported being surprised (Tsang, 2013) and empowered at their new-found ability to access their affective and cognitive processes to demonstrate their learning in this course. Further, the reflections revealed a deep level of their ability to be compassionate with others because they were compassionate with one another and themselves in their shared learning journey (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014). Compassionate engagement for us as authors, teachers, and practitioners therefore becomes a nuanced foundational practice of social justice that necessitates the ability to be reflexive while simultaneously making connections with others and society.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of narrative qualitative analysis is that the representation of an individual's narrative is subjective and can be seen as only personally meaningful (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, finding personal meaning is important for conscientization and reflexivity, because these processes help students' increased use of self in their practice contexts. Ultimately, this self-awareness and reflexivity increase students' empathy towards those who are vulnerable and marginalized.

Another limitation is that the sample of students falls within a specific geo-social context (Canadian, southwestern Ontario, largely middle-class and white). Some students had difficulty dealing outside of the traditional western methods of teaching, even though art-based methods have become an increasingly accepted way of learning. In keeping with a constructivist paradigm, we asked students to choose their modality of creative expression to provide near-limitless creative expressive forms. While this mediated potential differences in learning styles and individual cultural accommodations, the approach lacks generalizability (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Tapping into these narrative processes can be problematic as we tell different stories about ourselves at different times and in different contexts. Moreover, the understanding of the creative arts can potentially re-inscribe Euro-western forms of creative expression even though we used a multitude of examples of Indigenous, non-Euro-western expressive arts in our teaching examples. Lastly, how we feel about the context of the story being told can sometimes influence how the story is told and how the teller of the story and the reader can interpret it (Clandinin, 2013).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to advance the literature that maintains that arts-based mediums in the classroom will assist students in developing reflexive capacities, supporting them to develop a deep understanding of themselves and providing them with opportunities to consider how to authentically work with those who are marginalized and vulnerable. Using creative arts-based learning strategies also supports BSW students by providing them with the opportunity to develop foundational skills for promoting social justice in their emerging social work practice as they learn to see the world through a critical lens. The use of arts-based pedagogy in both teaching and learning provides students the capacity and ability to tap into places that may remain hidden, invisible, and inarticulate. It provides opportunities for students to unpack the hidden assumptions that are inherent that are invisible in their relations to power structures, whether they come from positions of privilege or intersecting identities of oppression. Lastly, it asks students to be vulnerable within themselves and others in a way that is safer.

We, as instructors, bore witness to, and actively participated in, a profound shared learning experience. Using an arts-based modality through the course, and in this research, we were compelled to not only ask students to step into a place of vulnerability, but also to obligate ourselves to step into these spaces with the students and with each other. We had to relinquish some of the control traditionally held by us as educators. It is through this engagement that we encountered and humbly celebrated a further nuance toward reflexivity.

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