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## Intersecting Interests: Qualitative Research Synthesis on Art in the Social Work Classroom

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# Intersecting Interests: Qualitative Research Synthesis on Art in the Social Work Classroom

## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a qualitative research synthesis that explored the intersections between art and social work. The scholarship notes a rise in interest in integrating creative arts practices in social work classrooms from assignment design to classroom activities. Also highlighted are the potential contributions of these arts-informed practices to teaching about topics related to oppression. The synthesis presented in this paper explored this potential through an interpretivist analysis of articles on the intersection of art and social work. Findings highlight the contribution of this approach to enhancing student engagement and critical reflexivity; creating a sense of collectivity and solidarity in the classroom; as well as transforming the role of the educator. Findings suggest the need for further research to explore the potential contributions of arts-informed approaches in social work education beyond a single classroom.

Cet article présente la synthèse d'une recherche qualitative qui a exploré les intersections entre l'art et le travail social. Les recherches effectuées indiquent qu'il existe une augmentation de l'intérêt à intégrer les pratiques des arts créatifs dans les salles de classe de travail social, allant de la conception des devoirs aux activités en salle de classe. Les contributions potentielles de ces pratiques qui intègrent l'art à l'enseignement de sujets liés à l'oppression sont également mises en relief. Les synthèses présentées dans cet article explorent ce potentiel par le biais d'une analyse interprétative d'articles qui se situent à l'intersection de l'art et du travail social. Les résultats mettent en relief la contribution de cette approche à l'amélioration de l'engagement des étudiants et de la réflexion critique; à la création d'un sens de collectivité et de solidarité dans la salle de classe; ainsi qu'à la transformation du rôle de l'éducateur. Les résultats suggèrent qu'il faudrait mener d'autres recherches afin d'explorer les contributions potentielles des approches qui intègrent l'art dans l'enseignement du travail social au-delà de la simple salle de classe.

## **Keywords**

art, anti-oppression, social justice, student engagement, critical reflection

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition of the potential for enhanced learning and teaching in social work education through the integration of arts-informed practices in the classroom. Social work is not unique in this regard; in fact, other professional disciplines such as nursing, midwifery, child and youth care and dietetics, to name a few, have recognized the importance of creativity and integrated arts-informed methods in education through in-class practices, assessment methods and course design (Bellefeuille, McGrath, & Jamieson, 2008; Gilkison, Giddings, & Smythe, 2016; Huye, 2015; Lapum et al., 2012; Schwind, Santa Mina, Metersky, & Patterson, 2015).

Arts-informed methods, distinguished from those that are arts-based, refer to practices that are not about the production of art for its own sake but about activities that rely upon the arts as a tool in education, research, and practice (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Huss, 2012). A recent interprofessional research synthesis on experiential learning over the past ten years that spanned the disciplines named earlier among others, briefly notes arts-informed methods as examples of pedagogies that seek to foster engagement and interactivity in the classroom (Waddell et al., 2016). In this paper, we focus specifically on arts-informed methods as examples of experiential pedagogies and report on the findings of a qualitative research synthesis that explored the intersection of art and social work in the classroom. Through a discussion of these practices, we hope that this paper will provide an example of how one discipline, social work, has crossed disciplinary boundaries to integrate creative arts in education. We focus on three main themes that emerged from our research synthesis in terms of the influence of arts-informed approaches on student engagement, critical reflexivity, and the role of the educator.

Social work scholars note the potential of this interdisciplinary linkage to contribute to professional development of students allowing them access to greater engagement with course material, a more critical and reflexive conceptualization of knowledge, enriched understanding of client experiences, and the potential to contribute to improved service provision and resistance against oppression (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010; Christensen, 2014; Dennison, 2011; Moxley, Feen-Calligan, & Washington, 2012; Ranta-Tyrkko, 2010; Shdaimah, 2009). In a special issue of *Social Work Education* journal exploring the interconnections between art and pedagogical practices, Hafford-Letchfield, Leonard, and Couchman (2012) highlight this emerging area of scholarship, and call for future research to support the development of this avenue.

Of particular relevance to our paper is how such methods are used in the context of courses focusing on issues of oppression and marginalization. As several scholars contend, the arts have had a long and complex relationship to issues of oppression and injustice (Barndt, 2006; Bishop, 2012; Kester, 2004; Reed, 2005; Reiter, 2009; Thompson, 2012). In her historical review, Bishop (2012) notes the complexity of this relationship in terms of the arts potentially reproducing and/or resisting oppression specifically in relations to politics and community participation. Ignagni and Church (2008) also point to this complexity in their discussion of how arts can be used to reinforce and/or resist ableist discourses. It is not within the scope of this paper to delve into this complex relationship between art and oppression. Instead, for the purposes of this paper, our interest is in how arts-informed approaches are relied upon within courses premised on social transformation and in the struggle against injustice which is at the heart of much social work education as consistent with Canadian accreditation standards (Canadian Association for Social Work Education, 2014).

## **Context: Situating the Synthesis in the Extant Scholarship**

This research synthesis brings together critical social work education in dialogue with arts practices seeking social justice. This interdisciplinary connection has received quite limited attention in the social work research scholarship. While anecdotal support exists for the use of arts-informed methods in social work education, there is a paucity of research studies exploring how such methods influence learning and teaching experiences in anti-oppression classes or otherwise, so that they may benefit pedagogical practices and professional development.

Within the scholarship, the benefits of the potential intersections between social work and the creative arts are highlighted not only for students, but also for practitioners and the communities we work with, as all are implicated in the professional social work relationship (Blundo, 2010; Keddell, 2011; Lee & Priester, 2015). Among the benefits that are discussed in the scholarship are the contributions to enhancing students' sense of critical reflexivity and bridging between theory and practice, especially in terms of understanding how social workers can play a role in facilitating social justice (Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015; Harrison, 2009; Huss, 2009; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Peabody, 2013). Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2012) argue that the integration of arts approaches allows for a reimagining of empowering approaches to practice beyond "traditional categories and lenses" (p. 683). Indeed, epistemologically, arts-informed approaches can assist social work to move beyond the Eurocentric focus on text and explore diverse modes of knowledge production and communication accessible to a wider range of participants at ease communicating visually not verbally (Castelden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2007; Dumbrill, 2009; Eisner, 2008; Walton, 2012).

While the growing interest in the intersection between creative arts and social work has led to the development of a nascent scholarship, this has been characterized by theoretical discussions of this intersection and anecdotal discussions of specific classroom experiences, as the above examples of cited texts illustrate. In our own writings (e.g., Wehbi, 2015; Wehbi, McCormick, & Angelucci, 2016; Wehbi & Straka, 2011), we have engaged with theoretical conceptualizations of the links between art and social work education. As such, we are not devaluing the importance of theoretical discussions. Instead, our argument is that there is a scarcity of research studies conducted that explore this interdisciplinary link. Anecdotal and theoretical discussions are valuable in shedding light on the intersection of arts and social work in education, but they contain several limitations.

First, theoretical discussions do not concretely offer guidance or examples of how ideas about knowledge building, critical reflexivity, and student engagement are applied in classroom settings. In addition, while anecdotal examples offer such insights, they remain a limited source of knowledge because the scope of such explorations is restricted to the populations within one particular classroom or university and are further limited to one professor's teaching style. Moreover, in her discussion of arts-based and arts-informed pedagogy for social change, Bishop (2012) notes that the outcomes of these educational approaches are usually measured according to the same standards and expectations meant to be met through traditional methods (e.g. knowledge retention, skill development, etc.). However, this epistemological position does not allow for the emergence of potentially unique learning outcomes based on the use of arts-informed methods.

In addition, within the current scholarship, the emphasis has been on the experiences of students, and yet professors become a large part of the interaction within the classroom, especially if they choose to adopt a social justice oriented lens to education that extends beyond lecturing or the "banking" method of education (Bishop, 2012; Jones, 2009). When educators exit the role of

lecturers and enter the space of creative relationship building for the goal of social transformation, their own experiences are influenced in ways that are yet to be fully explored. The experiences of these professors may have much to inform others who are contemplating the use of arts-informed methods in their own classrooms and this is perhaps even more important now in light of the growing new managerial emphasis in the profession and educational institutions on efficiency, effectiveness and measurable teaching and learning outcomes in social work education (Todd et al., 2015).

Building on the extant scholarship and gap in research knowledge, the current research synthesis asks the following question: How do social work educators rely upon arts-informed methods in teaching about oppression and marginalization; and in what ways do such teaching practices contribute to student engagement and critical reflexivity? The research question is framed from the perspective of educators as most of the available scholarship is written by educators and this is consistent with our chosen methodology that relies on studies as data; however, we anticipated gleaning student perspectives and voices through the data presented in the studies we reviewed, as discussed more amply below.

### **Methodology: Qualitative Research Synthesis**

Considering the relative paucity of studies exploring the intersection of art and social work in the classroom, and wishing to build on existing studies, we conducted a qualitative research synthesis (Howell Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Qualitative research synthesis is an umbrella term that refers to a broad variety of approaches rooted in diverse epistemological foundations, ranging from positivist systematic reviews to interpretivist meta-ethnographies (Saini & Shlonsky, 2012). For this synthesis, where we sought to re-interpret existing data and in keeping with our research questions, we aligned ourselves more closely with interpretivist traditions (Howell Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Noblit & Hare, 1988). Howell Major and Savin-Baden note that this approach is often mistakenly assumed to be an extensive literature review; instead, a qualitative research synthesis refers to “an approach that uses qualitative methods to analyse, synthesize and interpret the results from qualitative studies” (p. 10). Qualitative research synthesis brings together and offers re-interpretations of findings of several studies to answer a specific research question.

Our team consisted of students and professors from three Canadian universities, which allowed us to reflect upon social work education from the perspective of learning and teaching in diverse contexts. The make-up of our research team was also diverse in terms of social location, which opened a space to enter into critical discussions specifically related to race, sexuality, privilege, oppression, and power in how we interact with educational experiences. We also brought diverse artistic backgrounds to the team and experiences with practices, such as drumming, upcycling, poetry, photography, and sculpture.

Collective learning and methodologies manifested through regular discussions and mutual learning processes. Indeed, the project served as both a research experience and an experiential learning process for all members of the team. The first three members of the team (the first three authors listed on this article) participated in tutorials, workshops, and regular debriefing sessions to ensure an open learning and working environment. The other two members of the team participated in the analysis and reflections on education that further developed the synthesis. The team regularly discussed methodology and theoretical foundations prior to and during the research process.

As an initial step, we created a table listing all possible key terms to use in the search strategy based on the populations of interest (students and professors), the chosen intervention (arts-informed methods), and the context of the studies (social work undergraduate and graduate classrooms). This table defined our keywords and search criteria. The team then met with a library research specialist who reviewed and refined the table with us; the specialist also suggested appropriate databases and more specific search terms. The databases included in this study were ERIC, ProQuest, Social Work Abstracts, Social Service Abstracts, Sociofile, Psych Articles, and Psych Info. However, to capture as many discipline-specific articles as possible, we also hand-searched the following relevant journals: *Social Work Education*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *Critical Social Work*, and *Journal of Progressive Human Services*.

Our search restrictions consisted of focusing on peer-reviewed English-language articles published between 2000 and 2015. In a recent issue of *Social Work Education* specifically dedicated to arts-informed methods, the editor's note that the rise in these approaches in social work has been occurring over the past decade (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2012). As such, we enlarged our search to cover a time period lengthy enough to encompass this rise in interest in arts-informed methods in social work education. As consistent with our chosen methodology, the initial search identified thousands of results across the various consulted databases. For example, a search in ERIC, which is focused on education, and as such generated the largest amount of results, resulted in over 1,000 English-language articles from 2000 to 2015 that combined all of our keywords related to arts-informed social work classroom experiences focusing on student or instructor teaching and learning.

Following an initial search with these broad restrictions, and in keeping with our research questions, we scanned the titles and abstracts to eliminate duplicates and identify articles that focused on the use of arts-informed methods in social work classrooms adopting anti-oppression, social justice, decolonizing, or anti-colonial frameworks. These criteria worked to refine the search resulting in 61 articles. We further filtered the search to focus on research studies and 23 articles were identified through this further refinement.

Finally, the group read through these articles in their entirety (as opposed to titles and abstracts, and scanning of the articles) to identify articles that contained original qualitative data based on student input (as opposed to anecdotal examples, survey results, or instructor reflections). This emphasis was necessary in keeping with our research aims and questions while adhering to qualitative research synthesis methodology where original research data is necessary for analysis (Howell Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). As noted earlier, unlike a general literature review, qualitative research synthesis aims to reinterpret data to answer a specific research question and in this regard, as little as two studies is acceptable in terms of sample size (Howell Major & Savin-Baden). Hence, we focused our selection on articles that most closely match our research question and chosen methodology.

Following these guidelines allowed us to further narrow down the list of articles to three that contained original excerpts and thick description and that moved beyond anecdotal evidence to empirical qualitative research (Beatty et al., 2008; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; McPherson & Mazza, 2014). We then conducted analysis to code and derive the main themes from the articles. This included looking not only at the findings presented by the authors, but also analysis of the excerpts from participants in each study. We then grouped coded excerpts from the three studies together to build themes. In the remainder of this paper, we present the main themes that emerged from our synthesis while focusing on answering our research questions.

## Results and Discussion

In an effort to answer how the reliance on arts-informed methods in the classroom can contribute to student engagement and critical reflexivity, especially in courses teaching about oppression and marginalization, three main themes emerged. The first theme concerns the content of the course and specifically the emotional connection that students develop to the material in ways that move beyond what they are able to gain from traditional lectures. A second theme focuses on the classroom experience and specifically the relationships between students, and how these relationships challenge what is expected (or facilitated) in a traditional classroom. A final theme highlights the interaction and influence of arts-informed methods on educators. Before proceeding to a presentation of findings, we provide below brief summaries of the selected articles. In addition, a comparative summary of the reviewed articles is presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Comparison of Selected Studies*

Study	Participants	Context	Arts Methods	Methodology
Beatty et al. (2008)	13 students in 1 course	Graduate social work course on participatory action research	Music, collage, poetry, storytelling	Arts-informed action research; analysis of student learning journal entries
Desyllas & Sinclair (2014)	35 students in 1 course	Graduate course on social justice in social work	Zine-making	Content analysis of student reflections in an online forum
McPeherson & Mazza (2014)	8 students in 1 course	Undergraduate students in a community practice course	Poetry, installation, sculpture	Analysis of written student reflections including poetry-based reflections

McPherson and Mazza's (2014) undergraduate social work class of eight students participated in arts activism through the creation of an art installation and built on their learning through poetic therapy. Instructors introduced the students to the One Million Bones project, which entailed creating a mountain of ceramic bones that were then formed into a pile and displayed in the lobby of a US social work college. The exercise's purpose was to help students create a connection between discrimination locally to genocide and mass violence globally. Following the assemblage of the installation, students were asked to reflect upon their experience through structured written feedback, which addressed their thoughts regarding experience-based learning and action. Poetic therapy was also introduced as a method to encourage reflection. Through analysis of group poetry writing, the authors suggest that this exercise offered students an opportunity to explore their engagement with selected pieces of poetry and the One Million Bones installation. Poetry provided an avenue to articulate thoughts and concerns about the project's

influence, a desire to inspire others to action, and an appreciation for the beauty of the craft itself. The authors concluded that the two projects and personal reflections evoked in students a global sense of self and a higher state of conscious living.

The authors of the second article we selected were a group of thirteen multi-disciplinary graduate level students taking a participatory action research (PAR) course and their professor (Beatty et. al, 2008). The article's purpose was to document the process of engaging in PAR by attending to the lived experiences of participants through creative projects. Activities included drawing trees of life, reflecting upon poetry, journaling, and storytelling. In the classroom, learners engaged in a holistic learning experience as they explored arts-based activities while listening to music from different cultures and sharing food. Experts from journals and personal reflections revealed that students were able to gain a deeper understanding of PAR through arts-based projects, which culminated in the documentation of this communal process through the writing of this article.

In the final selected article, Desyllas and Sinclair (2014) report on the outcome of a zine-making assignment in a graduate social work class of 35 students. As both teachers and learners, the authors note the benefits of incorporating art-based projects into the classroom. Students were tasked with creating zines (homemade magazines) that addressed issues of oppression and marginalization. Students' journal entries indicated critical reflexivity and collective consciousness was achieved through the zine-making and sharing process. The authors laud the emancipatory praxis of zine making and arts-based education in deconstructing power relations regarding whose voices are valued as experts in society, as well as inspiring action. Additionally, students advocated for the creation of a permanent location for zines in the university library and they shared classmates' zines with communities outside the classroom.

### **Theme 1: Finding the Connection**

A key finding that can be gleaned from the three studies reviewed in this synthesis is the emotional connection that students discuss in relation to the topics discussed in class and to their own learning. Teaching about issues of oppression and social justice elicits a mixture of responses from students. In our own experiences when lecturing about such issues we have seen students react at times emotionally to the material discussed in class; and at other times apathetically, as though wishing to put a protective wall between themselves and difficult subjects. Even when students engage emotionally with the material, there remains a sense of reservation; students mention not feeling safe expressing vulnerability in class, especially when discussing how they are personally touched by experiences of oppression. Indeed, in a traditional lecture/discussion format, students can choose to sit back and not engage with the material. As the following excerpts from the studies reviewed illustrate, this disengaged response to the material becomes less of an option in an arts-informed classroom: "Ours was anything but a passive type of learning; we evoked all our senses and embodied participation, action and research" (Student; Beatty et al., 2008, p. 341), and

My zine was a great way for me to share with my classmates an issue that I feel is so important and that I am so passionate about. It was amazing to see my peers also put their passions into this creative project. (Student; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 312)



Students also used words such as “powerful,” “magical,” “surprised,” “awestruck,” “inspired,” and “fascinated” to share how they felt about their own and each other’s work. Not only does this demonstrate an emotional connection to the work, but also a sense of engagement that is not always possible to achieve in traditional classrooms. This “embodied” experience that students refer to is possible when a space is provided to express an understanding of the material beyond simply repeating or reflecting on what someone else has created (i.e., responding to a scholar’s ideas in an assigned reading). Put differently, while as students and educators we might find inspiration in reading the words of a scholar, being called to act upon them whether directly or implicitly through arts-informed classroom activities, has the potential to move us towards a stance of active engagement. As one student commented:

The zine process was good because it really made me think about what I want to stand for and to put my voice out there . . . we spent the term getting to know ourselves and this project was our opportunity to put those thoughts and opinions into action. (Student; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 311)

Dewhurst (2011) notes that the process of creating art is a form of knowledge translation that pushes students to understand social justice issues at a deeper level: “the act of turning their ideas into a work of art functions as a form of usable knowledge construction with the aim of communicating an idea to a larger audience” (p. 372). In the case of the experiences discussed in the articles, this form of knowledge construction is guided by and elicits critical reflection on the meaning of the work and students’ roles in contributing to anti-oppression and social justice. As one student commented about their participation in the One Million Bones Project:

I feel like—as social workers—this is part of our downfall. A lot of the times we are more focused on numbers, a grade, or a job. With projects like these, I think that making and identifying the object with a suffering person is much more important than the number of bones that get made. (Student; McPherson & Mazza, 2014, pp. 951-952)

Similarly, students working with the media of zines and storytelling expressed being able to reach a deeper sense of engagement and reflection that allows for a fuller integration of the material:

I love zines because I feel like there is an element of honesty one can reach without writing an academic paper. I cursed, I used first person. I turned things upsidedown. I enjoy being able to express myself without many boundaries. (Student; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 312)

Emotive reaction communicates full participation and experience. One’s full presence in participation and action is not only physical and mental, but emotional. . . This is the passion that keeps us moving for positive change, as we are charged, and impacted on a personal level. (Student; Beatty et al., 2008, p. 338)

Deeper engagement with the material implicates students in moving beyond traditional boundaries of their role students (and recipients of knowledge) to a greater emotional investment where they inject themselves into the material they are learning (e.g., “I used first person”; “full presence”).

This act of engagement allows them to more fully express themselves and the various aspects of their presence in the classroom (“not only physical and mental, but emotional”). However, this deep emotional engagement with the material is not without its costs: “This class and the related emotional and mental pieces are extremely difficult to write about, due to my emotional volcanic eruption in class” (Student; Beatty et al., 2008, p. 341), and “I found it hard because a personal zine puts your personal beliefs and feeling out there for the world to see and it is really hard to have someone read about you” (Student; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 312).

Other students expressed feeling mentally and emotionally “exhausted” or “triggered” in class and noted how the arts projects pushed them outside their “comfort zone”. As one student commented about zine-making: “Anything that pushes you beyond your comfort zone in the fight for social justice is clearly a tool that makes an impact on its creators and readers” (Student; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 311). It is such moments of discomfort that can elicit deeper learning. As Trevelyan, Crath, and Chambon (2014) argue, “difficult emotions” can arise when teaching students to be critically reflexive about social work practice. The authors suggest that the use of arts-based approaches allows students to experience this discomfort, which is necessary for ethical practice, as it pushes them to acknowledge the tensions related to power relations inherent in social work. The result is a collective understanding of the power of a holistic mindset as well as the importance of appreciating ambiguity and knowledge-making. Exploring and addressing these tensions is facilitated through classroom interactions and relationships, as the interactivity of arts-informed approaches allow for an engagement of students with each other.

## **Theme 2: Finding Common Ground**

The above discussion and selected excerpts hint at the idea that interactions in the classroom begin to take on an important role in fostering engagement; the focus is not only on the content of the material being presented. Put differently, the process of learning and the relationships forged in the classroom are as valuable as the material being discussed: “The poem you helped us make in class was surprisingly good and turned out to be an enlightening exercise. It was nice to see that people thought the same way that I did about the bones events we organized” (Student; McPherson & Mazza, 2014, p. 954), and

I write this because our society functions from a hierarchical perspective and does not value the collective, demonstrated as ‘power over’ rather than ‘power together’. I think it is important to emphasize that all participants are changed as a result of the learning process... (Student; Beatty et al., 2008, pp. 338-339)

Engaging with each other pushes beyond individualism and teaches group or community sharing. While still seeing the diversity in each other’s contributions, there is a sense of trying to find common ground. For example, referencing Aboriginal worldviews, some of the students in the Beatty et al. study (2008), which included Aboriginal students, commented on seeing knowledge in a holistic way and needing to find ways to understand each other’s perspectives. Instead of classroom discussions that sometimes turn to debates attempting to prove an intellectual argument, arts-informed approaches open the door to what some students refer to as finding the power of the collective.

We believe that this shift of emphasis from proving a point to finding common ground is possible because while it may be easy to dispute or dismiss another's point of view, it is harder to do so when someone shares of their inner experiences and emotions. As one student commented:

Stories are personal pieces of who we are, and when people share these, they are also showing a part of themselves. Just by listening, learning, and being open to understanding, I have come to realize that I am not alone in this world. (Student; Beatty et al., 2008, p. 339)

Importantly, finding common ground is not about erasing differences but about seeing how we can find ways to work together:

I was so impressed with some of the creativity that I saw in other people's zines, and a lot of people took the chance and wrote about themselves. It was fascinating to realize all of the different experiences that were in the room—it made me wish we had done a project like that earlier in the year. It helped everyone feel a little closer. (Student; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 313)

In this way, these types of classroom activities teach not only about the content of social justice, decolonizing, and anti-oppression theories and practices, but also about the processes of how to work to achieve goals of social change.

McPherson and Mazza (2014) lauded the benefits arts-based projects as an effective tool in unearthing complexities of experiences in relation to oppression, social action, and creating connection not only to the global society, but also with one another. Processes of critical reflexivity and engagement are key to achieving this type of collaborative stance in educational settings and in how this translates in our work for social change outside the classroom. Such a move towards finding common ground is necessary if we are to teach future social workers not only professional skills and knowledge, but also the requisite relationship-building processes to develop collaboration and collectivity. Within the context of neoliberal policies and their impact on practice, Ng (2012) speaks about such efforts towards collectivity as developing a decolonizing “pedagogy of solidarity” in the face of racism, oppression, and injustice.

But, moving towards a collaborative stance especially within the context of educational systems built and shaped around notions of competition (for grades, scholarships, awards, etc.) requires a radical shift of emphasis from vying for personal recognition to seeing oneself as part of a greater whole. In addition, as the students in the studies reviewed in this paper point to, such a shift in vision requires a change in how educators engage with students in the classroom and how they view their role.

### **Theme 3: Transforming the Role of the Educator**

Reviewing the articles included in this synthesis, it became apparent that the voice of the educators comes through not in the excerpts included in the authors' analyses, but in how they comment on and discuss their own process of designing creative assignments or classroom activities, and how they interact with student work and engagement with course material. Indeed, we noted that there was a high degree of intentionality and theory-based thinking about pedagogical goals in the course design; in other words, the assignments work together within the

context of an overall course and are not “stand alone” assignments. As noted earlier in this paper, research about the experiences of educators is largely absent from the scholarship on the intersections of art and social work. However, analyzing the articles as qualitative data begins to illuminate how the process of integrating creative arts in the classroom affects educators, as the following excerpts illustrate: “The information expressed and shared through zines mattered to us, as students and teacher—it mattered that we all were encouraged to use a voice unconstrained by society’s dominant framework...We, as students and teacher, were transformed” (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 315), and

As social work educators (and activists)...[w]e want our students to be changed by their educational experiences. We want them to take what they learn in our classrooms, and apply it later as they advocate for service users and for a more just society. Therefore, in order to deepen the impact of One Million Bones on the students, reflection was taught, modeled, and practiced. (McPherson & Mazza, 2014, pp. 949-950)

There is a sense reading the articles that the transformation referred to by the authors is at the heart of the educational experience for all involved. There was an awareness that students might get so absorbed in the micro/personal learning from arts-informed pedagogy that they may not make the connections to the macro/political that was a primary goal of the instructors; and strategies were instituted by the instructors to address this concern. For example, McPherson and Mazza (2014) emphasize that students need to be taught how to reflect critically on social justice and human rights based material, and describe their strategies in this regard. They contend that this type of reflection has to be “modeled,” thereby engaging the educator in a more active role. As a group of students and educators, Beatty et al. (2008) similarly highlight the collective nature of the learning process that modeled experientially course content in ways that broke down the traditional walls between students and educator. As one student commented:

“Actually looking at our class, it is kind of different from other classes, the atmosphere is relaxed and all attendants are on the same standing even our instructor. So actually we are applying the basics of PAR in the class” (Student; Beatty et al., p. 340). To arrive at a place of being unconstrained by society’s dominant framework required an active role on the part of the educator to acknowledge and resist traditional ways of teaching, such as how to assign value to students’ work, as noted by Desyllas & Sinclair (2014):

While the process of grading interferes with attempts to equalize power and deconstruct hierarchies between teacher and students, as an instructor who often incorporates creative assignments, I tend to emphasize that these assignments are like ‘bonus points’, since students will receive points if they complete the assignment. (p. 301)

Hence, as the students move outside traditional frameworks of learning, educators also need to challenge not only how they think about learning, but also how they model and practice it in the classroom and through assessment methods. Yet, absent from the articles is a more in-depth reflection focusing on how these pedagogical changes transform the instructor. Also absent is a critical examination of how social location and subjectivity affects the student-educator relationship and how this in turn affects the classroom environment (the article by Beatty et al.,

2008, refers to this briefly). This is not a critique of the articles, as the focus of the authors is on student experience. However, we raise this point to emphasize the need for a more concerted reflection on the influence and contributions of arts-informed approaches on the potential transformation of educators.

In our own experiences as students and professors, engaging with critical, non-traditional pedagogies within the classroom has sometimes led to challenging our very presence in the classroom. For example, for those of us among our team of authors who are Aboriginal, racialized, and/or queer, how we have introduced critical pedagogies or how we have felt safe/unsafe to share our experiences of oppression in formats that require deeper engagement with the material (and trust, as noted earlier) have had a bearing on how we present ourselves or how we engage/disengage in the classroom. For both students and educators who experience marginalization, the risks we take in the classroom are inextricably tied up with our subjectivities. These types of experiences require us to continue to think deeply not only about the experiences of students, but also about how educators are transformed by the introduction of arts-informed methods in the classroom.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This paper has presented the findings of a qualitative research synthesis bringing together the findings of three articles on the intersection of art and social work in classrooms focusing on anti-oppression, social justice, and decolonization. Findings of the synthesis impress upon us the potential of these methods to engage students more deeply in course content and to open space for critical reflexivity in the classroom. As importantly, the findings hint at how fostering deeper learning processes and experiences can potentially influence social work practice, as students adopt the values of collectivity, group sharing, and infusing passion for social change in their work. Such values open the space for creating an anti-oppressive environment and decolonizing the classroom so that the content of our courses is reflected in what we teach, how we teach, and how we involve students in learning.

As researchers, these findings and the limitations of this as well as the studies reviewed in this paper, impress upon us the need for further research about the intersections of art and social work seeking the goals of social transformation. The studies reviewed in this paper, while providing original qualitative data about student experiences through excerpts, are each still focused on one course. As noted at the beginning of the paper, this is a limitation in the current social work scholarship, which was partly the impetus for this present qualitative research synthesis. Future research could examine a range of courses, which could allow us to discern how differences in social location and subjectivity of the educators and students, subject matter, or level of instruction (graduate, undergraduate, diploma, etc.) could contribute to a more nuanced and rich understanding of the role of arts-informed approaches in social work education.

Moreover, building on interprofessional connections that exist in the field, research could explore how we learn from each other to enrich practice and teaching. Specifically, in practice settings outside of disciplinary silos in the academy, the links between social work and connected disciplines such as nursing, early childhood studies or child and youth care are evident as part of the fabric of intervention in communities. Future research could explore how arts-informed approaches in social work education could help us to bridge disciplinary differences to contribute to social change. Learning from the work of other professions that have integrated arts-informed approaches, among other experiential pedagogies, we can bring this knowledge to our classrooms

to enrich the learning experience of students in ways that reflect their future practice as members of interprofessional settings and contexts.

Moving forward as educators, we also need to examine how the educational processes we co-create in the classroom using arts-informed approaches transform us. An emphasis on understanding student experience in the classroom should not prevent us from also examining the transformational experiences of educators. Research into how arts-informed approaches contribute to professional development of educators could assist in enhancing our teaching practice as well as sense of personal growth. In addition, the wisdom gleaned from students and working with them in ways that deviate from and challenge traditional lecture styles could have much to teach us about creativity not solely in the artistic sense, but also in how we seek societal transformation that challenges oppression and seeks decolonization and social justice.

German artist Joseph Beuys (1983) commented that everyone is an artist, not in the sense of being able to produce what is traditionally understood as works of art, but in participating in creative re-imaginings of the world around us. Art can teach us to “understand” on a level of intuition, inspiration, and passion that allows us to engage more deeply with our creative potential. It is this creativity that can be key to transforming the educational experience and how future social workers envision for themselves an active role in contributing to social transformation.

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