Learning/Teaching Postmodern Ideas In
Three Different Settings

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Abstract

This paper addresses the training challenges we face when we work with postmodern ideas in three different educational settings in the greater Mexico City area: a university, a mental health clinic and a private postgraduate training institute. We discuss how the notion of Collaborative Learning Communities serves as a platform to address the question of the teaching/ learning dilemma in training therapists and we include several practical exercises as examples of possible ways to incorporate creativity and freedom in the learning process.

Key words: postmodern therapy, collaborative learning community, learning, teaching and creativity.

The Learning/Teaching Challenge: Who does the teaching and who does the learning?

Our approach to teaching and training in psychotherapy is based on the belief that teaching, training, supervision, consultation and therapy are part of a learning continuum. In this article we would like to share how this idea guides our work as we implement collaborative, social-constructionist and reflective practices in different educational settings.

Seymour Papert (1993) states that "Better learning will not come from finding better ways for the teacher to instruct, but from giving the learner better opportunities to construct" (p.1) This way of conceptualizing the construction of knowledge is closely connected to what Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson have often said regarding the process of becoming a therapist, that *therapy is learnable but not teachable*. In Anderson and Swim's (1995) words:

We believe that doing therapy is eminently learnable but not taught. Learning and learning therapy is the acquisition of knowledge and skills through experience. In collaborative, interactive dialogical model supervisor and supervisee learn together. Both change and experience transformation in their professional and personal lives (p.12).

When our students describe the process of learning collaborative therapies, they often say *it grows on you, it is contagious*. We can't just rely on "contagion", though. The question we ask ourselves as educators is: How can we help a person learn something that is not *teachable*?

We would like to answer this question by addressing the challenge of creating collaborative learning communities, in which students are invited to participate in a process of collaborative learning. A collaborative learning community (Anderson, 1999) has the

goal of accessing every member's creativity and resources and creating an environment

where each participant feels comfortable, open and part of the conversations, a community

where everybody has a sense of freedom and belonging, where participants can express

their ideas, questions and concerns without feeling blamed or judged In a collaborative

learning community, questions are welcome and appreciated as opportunities to develop

new dialogues and meanings around old questions or/and familiar subjects. We also believe

in reflection as a powerful learning tool. Donald Schön (1983) in his book *The Reflective*

Practitioner, invites professionals to reflect upon their activities and the impact they have

on themselves and their professional practices. We extend this invitation to our students

and incorporate reflecting teams and processes (Andersen,1987, 1995) in our work in

training

       We have been working on the development of collaborative and reflexive learning

communities in three different settings: university graduate programs, a community training

site and an independent postgraduate institute in Mexico City. Since we value the

postmodern idea of "multiple voices", we decided to write each section as a personal

account. The exercises we discuss are part of our experiences, and they are in constant

transformation, depending on the participants, the setting, the world news and the daily

human incidents in our lives. It is through "the doing" that we get our best learning.

University Settings

      Postmodern critique in general, and collaborative learning communities in

 particular, may run the risk of being perceived as too loose or too chaotic to be included as

part of a traditional university that requires specific syllabi, taking attendance and giving

grades. I, Sylvia London, have been working at marriage and family therapy masters programs at two Universities in Mexico City that focus on postmodern and social constructionist ideas and their application in therapy, teaching, consultation, and supervision. In this section, I share some ideas that have helped create a bridge to teach postmodern ideas in traditional settings. In order to make this contribution as clear as possible I will talk about my role as a class facilitator (faculty), the first encounter with students, the syllabus and grading procedures.

My Role as Faculty

As a facilitator of the learning process my role is to offer food for thought and reflection (Anderson, 1997), this can be done through readings, lectures and conversational exercises in and outside the classroom. My role within the collaborative learning community is different from the students'. My responsibility is to choose the content of the class, the type of teaching experiences, conversational formats and the grading system. As faculty I represent the rules and regulations of the institution (University) and have to work according to them . I do not think I know more than my students, but I do know the way I like to facilitate the learning process. My responsibility is to create a space and an environment where the students feel free to speak, make comments and ask questions. I am also responsible for inviting the students to share the best of them, and for giving them the opportunity to express their knowledge and think about their learning style.

The First Encounter with Students

When we meet as a group for the first time, my goal is to begin the creation of a collaborative learning community. We begin the class emphasizing the importance of conversation, relationships and personal knowledge. I usually ask them to participate in introduction exercises. In these exercises, the students are invited to share something about

themselves and about their goals for the class, including what they need to have happen in the class in order to feel comfortable. Some examples of these exercises include:

Exercise 1: The story of your name. This exercise is founded on a few simple questions: Please tell us your name. How was your name chosen? Tell us the story of your name. What are (or have been) the implications of going through life with that name?

I might start talking about my name and the stories and experiences attached to it. When the students are talking, I feel free to ask some questions and ask the fellow students if they want to ask a question or have a particular curiosity about the person's name.

The goals of this exercise include: 1. The development of new questions and curiosities regarding students' family histories, in the Mexican culture names are usually part of a family tradition. 2. Setting up relationships among classmates where stories take an important part of who they are, how they are seen and how they relate to each other. 3. Giving classmates the chance to ask questions related to names and the meaning of "naming". 4. Exercising memory gives students and faculty the chance to learn all the names. 5. Providing an example of identity building and social-constructionism. 6. Opening space for the possibility of intimate conversation.

Exercise 2: Agendas and learning style. Once we have all the names and the stories attached to them, I might ask questions like: 1. *What* would you like to happen between now and the end of the semester to make this experience worthwhile for you? 2. *How* do you learn best?

This exercise can be done in small groups, allowing participants to develop joint agendas and giving students time to have conversations in small clusters and to know each other a little bit better.

The students learning objectives and styles are taken very seriously. This information helps to shape the creation of a learning community as we begin to address personal needs, group needs, and how they relate to the University setting, the class and the syllabus. At the beginning, students may have a difficult time talking about what they want from the course and their learning style. They are not used to being asked or included in the design of a class. As they realize how the learning experiences are tailored to their preferences, they feel heard and responsible for participating in ways that make the experience suitable for their needs.

Syllabus and Readings

During the first meeting, we talk about the idiosyncratic nature of the materials and emphasize that the program and the texts are my personal/professional choices. We talk about the multiple possibilities of texts available to address each particular subject and some of them are included as suggested readings. There is more than one reading, usually two, from different authors, as class assignments and students are encouraged to read at least one.

Initially, students often have a hard time with the idea of more than one possible reading for each meeting; they get confused and don't know how to choose. They are not familiar with the authors and find the idea of choice somewhat foreign to their learning experience. It takes time to understand the value of having more than one author who talks about the same subject. Once students experience the richness of having multiple perspectives on a topic, they tend to search for more authors.

Some students find it useful to stay with one author through the semester, while others like to switch readings from class to class and others like to read both reading options every time.

Having more than one author or text for each class gives the freedom to elicit conversations that compare and contrast and keep the spirit of multiple voices alive in the classroom. It also represents the postmodern appreciation of multiple voices and descriptions and helps students take a critical approach to reading and understanding

Evaluation as Education: Teachers and Learners in Evaluation

"Evaluation is a social practice that involves the systematic generation and analysis of information about people's experiences in a particular program (construed as an intentional, orchestrated set of activities), as well as reflective judgments about the quality and meaningfulness of those experiences. So, a lot of what is learned in an evaluation relates to the program being evaluated, the contexts within which the program is implemented, and the nature and meaningfulness of various people's program experience". (Greene, 2002 p.1).

My approach towards evaluation coincides with this reflective and experiential view of learning

Grading papers. Every time students do an assignment, individually or in a group, they are asked to bring the original and two copies: one for the facilitator, one for the faculty assistant and one for a fellow student. Students can bring more copies and invite as many readers as they want in this reviewing process. In this particular format each students will read and comment on at least one fellow student's paper. This exercise gives the students the opportunity to read and provide feedback to their classmates it is also a very rich way to be exposed to different writing and learning styles and, last but not least, it makes the grading system open and public. Students are given specific guidelines for reading and providing feedback to their fellow students' work. These include: 1. Review the instructions for the paper and make sure the piece you are reading follows the paper's

requirements in terms of content and form. (i.e. Introduction, Literature Review,

Theoretical Framework, Proposal, Conclusions, Bibliography, APA style, etc). 2. Read the

paper and write your comments with the same care and interest and respect you would like

someone else to read your work. 3. Provide feedback in any of a variety of forms (oral,

written, etc.).

Feedback meeting. Once the papers are read, we have a meeting with each student

in which their fellow student(s) and faculty provide feedback about their paper. They are

also welcome to provide feedback about the student's participation, performance and

growth during the class. Students are invited to participate in the conversation and to

comment on their own performance. At the end of this conversation, the evaluation group

comes up with a grade (number or letter) for the student. The process is open and public,

following the idea of public craft proposed by Boyte (2000): "Work that is undertaken for

public purposes and in public ways [it is work that] adds public judgment or wisdom to

knowledge" (p.1). In this process of making their work public, the voices of the students

become as important as the voice of the teacher and power is de-centralized and shared. By

reading other papers, students can refer back to their own work and appreciate differences

in quality and styles. They realize how much they can learn from each other, they also have

the challenge of finding ways to provide feedback that is useful as well as open,

appreciative and growth oriented.

Grading exams. Exams are viewed as a way to assess the clarity of the teaching/

learning process and classroom activities, as well as students' capacity to translate and

appropriate knowledge. Whenever written traditional exams are used (as part of the

university's requirements) they have the goal to assess the understanding of particular

concepts and we use the following grading system: 1. Students take a traditional written

exam in class. 2. Students exchange exams after finishing them. 3. Students go home and look in the textbook for the exact "verbatim" answer to each question and write it for their fellow student in their exam.   4. Students give classmates additional feedback in the way they wished it would be given to them. 5. The facilitators then, read the exams with the students' comments to get some ideas about the class progress and learning.

This exercise requires students to go back and review the textbook and find the exact answer to the question. It also elicits conversations in class about the ways the questions can be answered and the language that can be used to translate the books´ language into one that is more comfortable and familiar to them and still includes the main idea in a way that can be understood by a reader. As a teacher, the exams and the grading system give me information regarding the concepts that need to be reviewed. This exam exercise provides the opportunity to develop skills to look at other people' work and to comment on it in an appreciative and constructive way. The grade given to the exam, as in the paper, is public and has a colleague as a witness of the grading process (Boyte, 2000).

Although evaluating is something that I did not appreciate in the past, having students participate in these exercises as a way to assess their work and their colleagues´ has provided the opportunity to value the process of evaluation. I have found this way of approaching evaluation to be open, fair and public. Students have commented that the process it is not only challenging for them but it is a learning experience in itself, which coincides with Greene's (2002) idea of evaluation as education.

A Community Training Site

In this section I, Irma Rodriguez will describe the challenges we face when the teaching/learning process takes place in a training site at a community mental health clinic, where the learning of theory and practice go hand in hand. The work described here takes

place at a mental health clinic within Casa de los Niños de Palo Solo a Montessori School in the outskirts of Mexico City. The clinic, located inside the school, provides psychological, educational and consultation services to members of the school and the community at large. We strive to offer quality clinical services to our consultants, as well as an academic program that meets the learning needs of the therapists in training. Therapist who come for training here are clinicians who are interested in incorporating postmodern and social constructionist ideas into their practices.

Orientation to Training

Since the clinic is housed in a school, we interact with many people and often work with the school children, their parents and "guides" (Montessori teachers). Given the complexity of the site and the amount of people involved in the process, we like to start therapists' training introducing a metaphor inspired by Harlene Anderson's (1997) idea of the therapist being a guest, "a guest…who visits clients for a brief moment…who floats in and out of the continuous and changing conversations they are having" (p. 99).

Exercise 3: "Being host /guest". In this exercise some of the following questions are used to invite the students to explore their own ideas regarding being a host and a guest in their common social practices and how these can be relevant to the therapist-client relationship, in which sometimes we are hosts and other times we are guests: 1. What are your ideas regarding being a *host*? 2. What do you do as a *host*? 3. How do you behave as a *guest?* 4. What makes you a good *guest*? 5. How would you describe an atmosphere where you feel comfortable and respected?

This exercise creates the beginning of a comfortable and safe working atmosphere.

Exercise 4: Personal expectations and resources. All the members of the group, including myself, are invited to reflect on the following questions and have a conversation

in pairs, after which we get back together as a group. 1. What do you want to get from this learning experience? 2. What can you offer to bring into this learning experience? 3. What are your assets, could you describe them? 4. What do you feel passionate about your life/work?

This exercise helps to access the resources and knowledge available in the learning community and helps us design the format for training as well as for our therapeutic sessions. It also gives the students an opportunity to talk about their expertise and their passion, creating relationships based on abilities and a sense of confidence and knowledge.

The Therapy Training Program

The program at the clinic is two-fold: theoretical and practical. Even though we do not make a clear distinction between theory and practice in our training program, I make the distinction here for the sake of clarity. Theoretical training begins with some basic pre-assigned readings (i.e. therapy, postmodern critique, constructionist and collaborative ideas, etc.). As the semester moves along we include more materials according to the needs of the group, the clinical population and the nature of the clinical work. Practice is the main purpose of the training, we see clients every time we meet as a group and the class schedule is organized around therapy appointments. Students take turns participating as therapist and as members of reflecting teams.

Betty Regains her Mother[1]: A Case Example

A clinical example will give the reader an idea of how the needs that arise from the clinical practice and the characteristics of the population we work with guide the selection of readings and the exercises for the learning/teaching process. Betty is a six-year-old girl,

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[1] In order to protect the identity of the family the names have been changed.

who was referred to the clinic by her Guide (teacher) who was worried about her. In the teacher's words: "Betty has a hard time doing her work, she cries in the classroom and talks about wanting to die.

We scheduled a first session with the mother and the guide. Two therapists conducted the session and the rest of the group listened part of a reflecting team. The guide was in the session for the first ten minutes and shared her concerns regarding Betty. After the guide left, we talked with the mother and learned about her life situation. During the last year she had left her four daughters with her mother because she moved in with a man. The relationship did not work out and she decided to go back to her mother's house and to her daughters. Since her mother had returned back, Betty was having a hard time interacting with everybody at home, crying all the time, having difficulties sleeping, and was constantly worried about her mother leaving them again. The mother assured Betty that she made a big mistake leaving them and that she would never leave again. During the session, the mother was very emotional and embarrassed about her actions; she wanted to find a way to convince her daughters that she would never leave them again.

After listening to the conversation in the reflecting team, one of the therapists suggested that the mother could perform the following ritual. We asked the mother to go back home and make two boxes. In one box she was to put the things she would like to leave behind, in the other she was to include what she would like to carry on to the future. She was asked to find a safe place at home for the boxes. We then asked her to carry in her purse small pieces of paper to write whatever came to her mind as the days went by. At the end of each day, before going to bed, she was to choose which paper belongs to which box. We asked her not to open the boxes and to bring them to the next session.

The "doing" informs theoretical learning. When the session was over, there were lots of questions regarding the use of rituals in therapy. This particular interest that emerged from the clinical session provided the opportunity to talk about different ways of using rituals in therapy, including different theoretical frameworks. I suggested that the group could research some authors that talk about the use of ritual in the family therapy literature, for example: Imber Black (1988), Selvini Palazzoli et al. (1978) and Freeman, Epston and Lobovits (1997). This is an example of how the clinical work and the students' specific interests inform the kind of learning activities and readings we have in the group.

Using the students´ strengths and resources. In the second session, the mother came with her four daughters. She brought the two boxes and was eager to share them. While mother was talking about the ritual, the oldest daughter was engaged in the conversation, but the other girls remained silent. This silence along with their body posture and facial expressions made us (therapists) feel anxious and uncomfortable. The tension was mounting, and at that point I thought about one of the students who had experience in relaxation and breathing techniques. I asked her to help us create a more relaxed atmosphere, and in a very natural manner she invited all of us to do some relaxation exercises. Through the use of physical movement, the atmosphere changed into a more playful and fun one and we were able to talk through our bodies and incorporate everybody into the conversation. This is an example of how our students' abilities become an essential asset in our work together.

Becoming a collaborative community where everybody belongs. The atmosphere was now more comfortable, everybody felt more relaxed, but the girls were still not ready to talk. We thought that if we created a more intimate setting, the girls might feel safer to talk. In order to do that, I asked the girls to choose one or two therapists to work with.

Three smaller groups were formed and worked in separate spaces for part of the session. The groups focused on the girls' views of the family situation and their wishes and hopes for the future. When we all came back together, each group presented their work and the others listened and reflected. The family left the session with a sense of "being a new family", a family with hope, trust and direction for a future together.

This session is an example of one of the possible ways to create a postmodern collaborative learning community, in which every member therapist and client play an important and relevant part in the conversation. In this particular case, working in smaller clusters became a vehicle to facilitate intimate relationships and conversations. This also gave the students an opportunity to have more active and creative roles in the therapeutic process. This experience also illustrates the collaborative notion of "doing what the occasion calls for" as we chose to change and adjust the session according to the clients' needs, challenging traditional therapeutic formats.

Through experiences like these we have learned together that the creation of a Collaborative Learning Community is a slow and delicate process. This implies that each one of us can take as much time as needed to feel a sense of comfort, safety and belonging.

Independent Post-Graduate Institute

In contrast to my colleagues at the university and the school based clinic- I Elena Fernandez teach at Grupo Campos Elíseos (GCE), the experience takes place with students who come to us looking for training in postmodern therapies. In a way this makes my job easier because a modern institution does not host the teaching. Our students/colleagues at GCE already come to us knowing that we will do everything possible to create a Collaborative Learning Community (Anderson, 1997) and to work from a postmodern

stance. All our students are interested in doing collaborative work or adding some of these ideas to their own models or philosophical postures. We like to explore ideas and practices under the umbrella called postmodern critique (Anderson, 1997)

We read and explore together theory and practice. We see some of the clients of our students/colleagues at the institute or they share their client's stories with the rest of the group. This is done in a space we've called "clinical conversations group". When we see clients or hear their stories told by therapists, we use different versions of reflecting teams. I could perhaps express my intentions in teaching postmodern psychotherapy by borrowing Bakhtin's (1981) ideas on the novel: "The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language--that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world" (p. 366). One of my most important goals as a teacher/learner is to create a space where my students/colleagues can reflect on their own psychotherapeutic language and the languages of others, including those of the clients. By creating this dialogue with others we, hopefully, enlarge our views of the world.

These learning communities can freely explore theory and practice. In our work together we've found some ideas that are helpful in the creation of learning communities. and I have developed several exercises to facilitate the discussion of some of these key ideas, including the social construction of reality, therapist responsibility, where ideas come from, and how thinking about ideas enlarges the theories we use.

Exercise 5:Other views of reality. . Reading and reflecting on theory is a very important part of what we do at GCE. We read books and articles by Tom Andersen, Harlene Anderson, Walter Truett Anderson, Kenneth Gergen, and many other authors. I also like to use short stories that I specially enjoy. I love to read fiction and to share with

my students/colleagues some of the incredible wisdom from these writers. Some of my favorites are the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, the Mexican author Angeles Mastreta, among others. By introducing information that comes from off the beaten path my students/colleagues become post-modern critics more readily. They find that outside academia there are different ways of making descriptions about various events and experiences. It also opens fresher places to reflect upon how we construct realities with others and with ourselves.

After reading these texts certain questions arise that can create bridges between literature and therapy and highlight how identity can be understood as "a person in a conversation" One example comes from reading some of Borges' essays (I like "Borges and I" (1964)), where he plays with ideas about nations, identity and the occurrence of change. Afterwards I may ask some of the following questions: 1. Who has the responsibility of one's life? 2. Who is (are) the author(s) of my life? 3. Do tradition and geography matter? 4. Would you be different if you had been born somewhere else, or at another time? 5. Do the questions posited above apply to your conversations with your clients?

The group generates many more questions then. I've found it especially interesting when the groups talk about the stereotypes of our identities, the possibility of being objective, about oneself or others, and the transformation we perceive in ourselves through experience. This exercise is also an invitation for students/colleagues to bring different texts and other media that have been helpful for them to understand reality from a postmodern stance. An example that comes to mind is seeing The Matrix series of movies because it was recommended by one member of the group who found in it new ways of understanding how we view reality.

Quotes. Sometimes I use a quote by Dag Hammarskjold, Secretary General of the United Nations, Nobel laureate (1905-1961): *If only I may grow: firmer, simpler--quieter, warmer.* And I may ask some of these questions: 1. What values are so important for you that you want to honor them in your life? 2. If you want to be firmer with your values, what do you need to do? 3. If you want to be simpler, what does that mean to you? 4. Are there any situations in which you would prefer to be quieter? 5. Are you interested in being warmer? If you are, how would you achieve it? 6. Does this quote relate to the way you want to work? If it does, how? If it doesn't, how?

The interesting thing that happens by doing these exercises is that all the members of the team start reflecting on their own lives and the lives of others. In my experience, these questions open up conversations in which everyone participates in the teaching-learning experience. By using quotes or examples from literature student-learners feel their opinion is on the same level of the facilitator. This openness in turn fosters exchanges about philosophical questions of theory and practice. In our postmodern work it is important to reflect on our own values and learn how to present ideas and questions to others within that frame. It is also expected of our student/colleagues to think about their personal styles of being therapists and their responsibility in being one.

Exercise 6: Engrossing our ideas: Dumb and dumber? It is very important for us to be open to world events. . When the philosopher Jacques Derrida died, the training team decided to read his work. We tried, but the complexity of his texts made it impossible for us to read them. We made a bold move and decided to read *Derrida for Beginners* (Powell, 1996). It is not uplifting to read something that implies you have no clear understanding of an author like Derrida. The group also consulted another book called: *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Philosophy* (Stevenson, 2002). We used this text frequently. We went quite

slowly, reading in class phrase by phrase, understanding some, getting confused by lots of it but finally, in the process of understanding Derrida, we had many lively discussions on topics like: what deconstruction is for each one of us, what it means to be an outsider or how the prevalent ideas in society can make us slaves to ideologies without us even knowing it. Some of the ideas that resonated with the group were: 1. To be critical of assumptions we inherit. 2. To be cautious of not knowing we have those presuppositions. 3. The importance of questioning hierarchies. 4. That texts can be understood in different ways at different times by the same reader and by different ones. 5. That people can become marginal simply because they are minorities or because they think or act differently. 6. That we should be curious and examine what we know.

We stopped feeling so dumb; instead we greatly appreciated the effort others have made to explain philosophical ideas that at first can be obscure and complicated. We had a great time. We can admit more readily now that there are theories we don't understand, but we can find a way to try to find more about what challenges us in our work. Although we still like to read and reflect on more traditional texts, we learn a lot from solving immediate needs, like the one produced by Derrida's death. Interacting with the new and the old in a reflective way brings out the postmodern in us.

All the examples given above are ideas that work sometimes, but not every time. I see them more as a platform from which we can take off and from where all the members of the group can visualize and propose different ways of learning/understanding the work of post-modern therapy.

Some Final Thoughts…

Going back to our original question: How can we invite people to be part of a teaching/ learning situation to learn something that is not teachable? We think that as teachers, life long learners, (Anderson, 1999) interested in the creation of collaborative learning communities, we have the relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) to: 1. Facilitate relationships that are more horizontal and fair. 2. Create respectful, caring and accepting learning environments. 3. Foster educational activities that enhance individual creativity. 4. Develop evaluation processes that are learning experiences by themselves. 5. Remain as *learners*, in the hermeneutic sense of being willing to share and put our own preconceptions at risk (Schwandt, 2004).

We agree with Csikszentmihalyi (1996) when he says that creativity "arises from the synergy of many sources and not from the mind of a single person" (p.1). We feel this creative synergy everyday in our classes as our students and we are both teachers and learners.

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