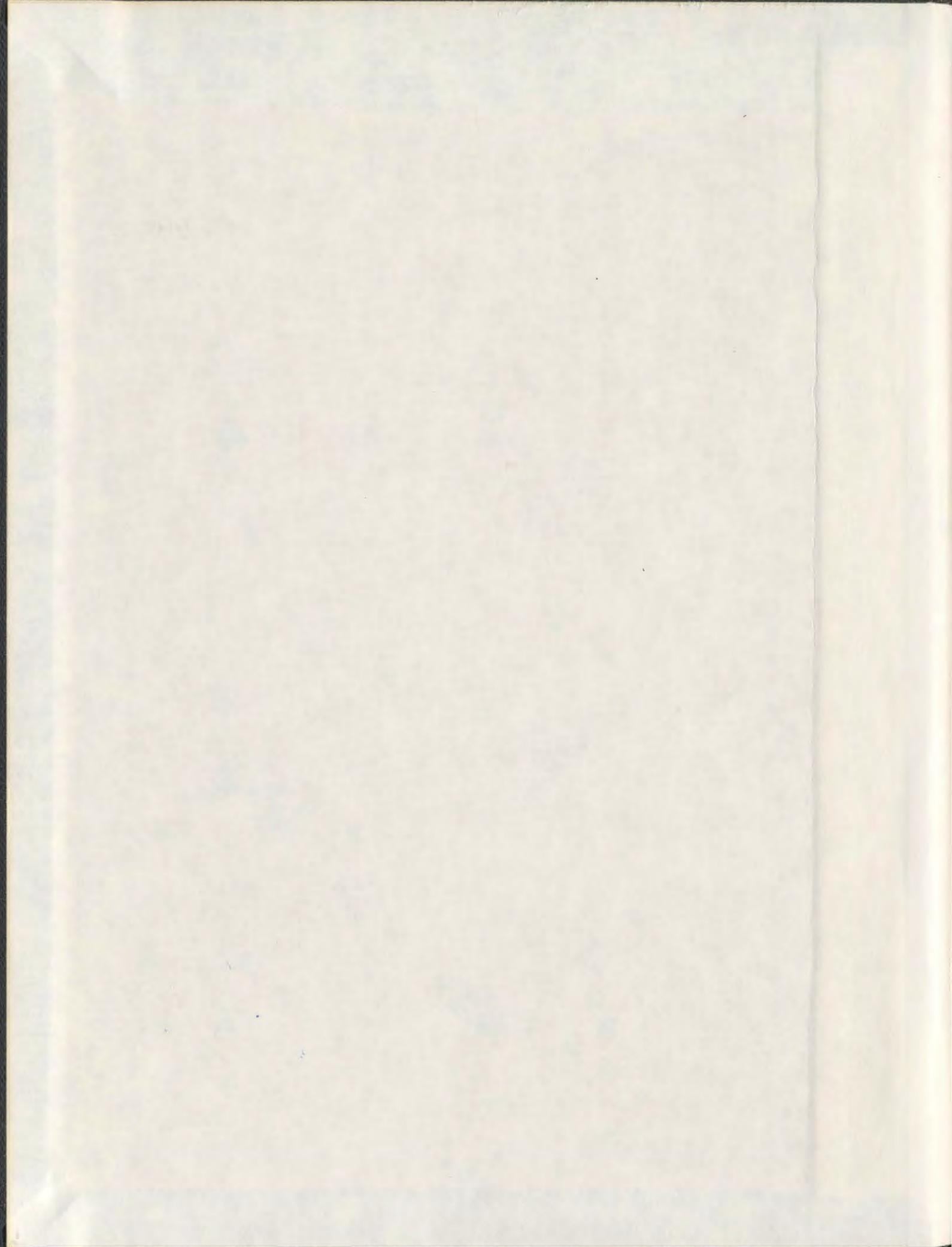


HONORING THE SUBJECTIVE:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE SELF-REFLEXIVE
PORTFOLIO IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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HONORING THE SUBJECTIVE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SELF-REFLEXIVE
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by

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Abstract

The social work profession has a history of duality between what is taught in the academy and what is practiced in the field. This qualitative study explores the use of the self-reflexive portfolio as a pedagogical tool to bridge the schism between social work education and practice. The self-reflexive portfolio encourages students to integrate the personal into the professional by valuing lived experience and embracing different ways of knowing. With the teacher serving as a guide, students direct their own learning in a process of exploration and processing in sharing circles. This research draws on Liane Davis' (1985) heuristic of the male voice represented in the academy and the female voice represented in practice; postulating that pedagogical tools from within a feminist liberatory perspective can begin to bridge the divide between social work education and practice. The research asks nine Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social work practitioners, all former undergraduate social work students in a Northern Alberta degree program to articulate their experiences with the portfolio courses and how they believe it informs their practice. Employing qualitative interviews and a sharing circle, data is analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach. In presenting the data, a medicine wheel is used to represent the individual voices of the study participants. The resultant thematic model and visual of a pinwheel metaphor emerges to explore the themes shared in common by study participants. The need for congruence between pedagogy and classroom practices is emphasized, as is the need to bring the student voice forward into the practice-education discourse in social work. Implications for social work education and ideas for future research are presented.

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Chapter One

Introduction and Overview

1.1 Paradigms as Historical Legacy

Social work developed from two distinct movements, that of the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement House Movements (Leighninger, 1987). As social work moved into formal university settings, these two movements became strong representations of two disparate factions within social work education and practice. Sue Penna (2004) articulates the historical development of this debate starting from the 'age of reason' to the current state of education. On one side of the debate are academics espousing a positivist approach to social work education and practice. Heavily influenced by the Cartesian logic prevalent in universities and a drive for social work to be heralded as legitimate as the esteemed professions such as medicine and law, these social work educators believe in a systematic, objective, and rational approach to knowledge. Knowledge, from this paradigm, arises through the application of scientific procedures following certain rules of logic. It is the practitioner's responsibility to apply theoretical knowledge developed by researchers in the academy into social work practice.

On the other side of this debate are academics approaching social work education from within an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm maintains there are multiple ways of knowing, and all knowledge is subjective; not value neutral but resting in a situational context (Parton, 2003). Influenced by critical social theory and Marxism, and later feminism and post-modernism, these educators support the concept of reflexive practice, where practice experiences inform theory (ibid).

The educational setting, usually universities, where social work is nested

manifests the objectivity-subjectivity debate through different pedagogical practices, curricula, research, and the mission statements of the different schools of social work across Canada. The epistemologies historically influencing social work provide context for the gap between social work education and practice that currently exists in the profession.

1.2 The Education-Practice Schism

There is a documented lack of congruence between what is being taught in education and what actually occurs in the field (Penna, 2004). Many social researchers have reported that while practitioners can identify different techniques they use in practice, they cannot attribute it to a specific theory (Gould & Harris, 1996). The pursuit of science continues to dominate social work even though research and discourse literature consistently demonstrate the rift between practice and education. “Despite the enthusiasm for empirically based models among academicians, studies have shown that even those practitioners who have been schooled in the new scientific paradigm fail to integrate evaluative techniques into their practice once they enter the profession” (Davis, 1985, p.107).

Many scholars echo the same lament – there is something missing in educational environments because the formal product knowledge is not translating into actual social work practice. “One has only to listen to practitioners to know that the long term rift between practitioners and academicians and researchers has not been narrowed” (Davis, 1985, p.106). Haworth (1984) concludes “when experience challenges the very methods being used to assess experience, it would seem to be ‘scientific’ to reconsider the methods” (p.353 as cited in Palmer, 2002, p.195). Significant writers in education (see

Dewey 1938; Schön, 1983; Freire, 1970) argue for the need to incorporate experience and self into learning. It is their position that educators need to encourage reflective processes in students and themselves for meaningful learning to transpire.

As part of the profession, social work educators need to prepare students for practice. Education needs to incorporate processes that meaningfully support practitioners' work with people.

Social work must exemplify the real world's struggle with what is not normative, or fixed, or pre-determined. To deny the versatility and blurring of genres that is possible and necessary in social work practice and education is to reduce the profession to an outmoded system at this crucial time, when we face the increasingly complex society of the new millennium. (Martinez-Brawley, 1999, p.344)

If the rift is not substantively addressed, education will continue to estrange itself from social work practice.

The past thirty years has witnessed a renewed call to bridge the education-practice schism. Social work practice has entered a new era; an era of globalism, decolonization, and diversity.

A common source of frustration for students in social work schools is the contrast between some of the ideas presented about social work practice and the style in which the material is communicated in the classroom setting. At the same time that the subject matter of a class discussion might focus on the importance of involving service users...students have no say over classroom content, requirements, or teaching approaches. At the same time that social work values about the inherent worth and dignity of the individual are being elaborated, students experience devaluation of their worth by faculty. (Galper, 1980, p.238)

Critical and radical theorists believe that social work education and the Eurocentric positivist model it upholds must embrace the shifting realities or risk becoming benevolent colonialists (Fraser and Taylor, 1991). This call to make education meaningful and relevant to practice is the impetus for the current research.

1.3 Purpose of Research

The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to the building of a bridge between social work education and practice. Feminist liberatory pedagogy, with tools such as the self-reflexive portfolio,¹ can encourage the infusion of the subjective into the learning environment. Feminist pedagogy honors the “personal as a way of knowing, giving credence to thoughts, feelings, and experience” (Bowker & Dunkin, 1992, as cited in Webb, Walker, & Bollis, 2004, p.415). This learning through the application of subjective knowledge and understanding then becomes translated into social work practice. It is not the intent of the research to suggest the replacement of the objective, but to give equal credence to the placement of the subjective in the education of social workers.

Firmly situated in an interpretivist paradigm influenced by critical social theory and feminist pedagogical principles, the research brings the voices of nine social work practitioners into the education-practice discourse. The research carries out a retrospective analysis of these practitioners’ experiences as undergraduate students who engaged in portfolio courses as part of the requirements of their Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program. Educators help prepare students for practice, it is therefore important to bring the student voice forward to begin to address the historical schism between social work education and practice. The question under investigation is: *how do*

¹ The portfolio is a student-directed project where the instructor serves as a guide in a transformative learning process, valuing lived experience, and other ways of knowing. The notion of reflexivity is taken to mean “that we have a social and intellectual unconscious - and consciousness - that we bring to any situation. Hence, we have to try to be self-aware in order to extend and further our understanding of situations” (Matthew & Jessel, 1998, p.61). The portfolio is typically delivered in a seminar format, where students are co-contributors to the learning as it transpires over the course of each term. Concurrent to each portfolio course, students are engaged in classical social work educational courses, allowing opportunity for the integration of the personal and professional into their developing model of practice.

social work practitioners' experiences of self-reflexive portfolio courses inform the inclusion of the subjective into their social work practice?

1.4 Chapter Overviews

In this introductory chapter to the dissertation, the historical legacy and current tension between social work education and practice is presented as the impetus for the current study. The study explores the infusion of subjectivity into practice through the application of pedagogical tools such as the self-reflexive portfolio.

Chapter two presents an overview of the landscape for the study, the positivist-interpretivist dialectic. From this beginning, the literature review articulates the theoretical contexts and historical conditions leading to the current state of social work education. The final section of the literature review develops the conceptual framework for understanding feminist liberatory pedagogy and the use of self-reflexive portfolios in social work education.

Chapter three details the qualitative methodology employed in the research, providing an overview of the principles of grounded theory and the modifications made to better suit the current study. Issues of credibility and ethical considerations are addressed alongside details of sampling, data collection, and strategies for data analysis.

Chapter four brings the voices of the individual research participants forward in presenting the data from the interviews. Overviews of the different portfolio projects are presented as are salient themes from each interview, introduced by the researcher and supported with excerpts taken from the transcripts. The chapter concludes with presentation of the medicine wheel as symbolically representing the individual journeys of the different participants' experiences of portfolios.

Chapter five reports the results of the data analysis. This represents the stories of the collective voice of the participants. Included are two constructs adding different dimensionality to the interpretation of the findings. One is a conventional thematic model using stages, themes, and elements elucidating the details of findings extrapolated from the interviews; the other a symbolic metaphor developed by the participants during the sharing circle following the preliminary data analysis.

Chapter six consists of conclusions and implications resulting from the research, including recommendations for social work education in addressing the schism between what educators teach and the real world practice settings of social work practitioners.

1.5 Chapter Summary

This introductory chapter provided an overview of the dissertation. The historical legacy of an objectivity-subjectivity divide in social work education and later translating into an education-practice tension provides the contextual landscape for the current study. The present research explores the infusion of the subjective in social work practice through a retrospective exploration of social work students' experiences of portfolio courses and how they perceive it informs their practice. It is critical that educators address the gap between social work education and practice, to begin to deconstruct historic understandings and develop a new understanding of communication and knowledge. The social work profession consists of both education and practice. To be disparate is to threaten the viability of the profession in the future. Social work educators can play a significant role in meaningfully applying principles of critical pedagogy in the social work classroom, adding congruence between teaching content and teaching processes.

The next chapter provides an overview of the literature relevant to the current research exploring pedagogical tools that can assist social work practitioners to infuse the subjective into practice.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The study begins by acknowledging a rift between social work education and practice. Historically there has been a dual focus in the field of social work. Social work educators tend toward a view of scientific philanthropy and value objectivity in observation and knowledge; social work practitioners in contrast are more subjective in their orientation and tend toward understanding the world from the perspective of those with whom they work (Fraser & Taylor, 1991; Schön, 1987; Davis, 1985; Mullen, 2002). This dichotomy results in a problem that is the focus of this study – is it possible to make social work education relevant and meaningful to practice by bridging the objectivity-subjectivity gap between what is taught and the skills needed for practice in the social work profession? One solution is to base pedagogical tools on an interpretivist epistemology. Tools like the self-reflexive portfolio can infuse the subjectivity applied in practice settings into the educational milieu.

The first section of the literature review provides the landscape for the study. It delineates the two disparate factions found in social work education. On one side are those who argue for standardized procedures and objectively situated knowledge. Based on a positivist model of science, they pursue large-scale quantitative research studies (often based on surveys) and actively seek research funding. Their view is that social work practice needs to be more diligent about following the knowledge created through the careful, systematic, applied research findings of universities. “Rigorous professional practice is conceived as deriving its rigour from the use of describable, testable,

replicable techniques derived from scientific research and which is based on knowledge which is objective, consensual, cumulative and convergent” (Parton, 2003, p.3). The positivists postulate that students need to do a better job of retaining and applying the objective facts and knowledge given to them in the classroom in the field of social work practice (Sheppard, 1997).

On the other side of the epistemological debate are those social work educators who adopt an interpretivist or subjectivist epistemology. These academics are seen by some as ‘speaking from the margins’. Their worldview holds there are multiple ways of knowing and coming to know. They value subjectively situated knowledge that is representative of the tapestry of diversity and richness in the world. Howard Goldstein (1985), social work educator and theorist, illuminates this position in his discussion of *Empiricism vs. Human Values*.

Those of us who have studied the perplexing role of human values are aware that empirical methods are about as illuminating in this realm as they are in the attempt to understand poetry, spirituality, faith, and creativity. Such methods serve only to reduce a boundless human condition to sterile, meaningless, and narrow (albeit manageable) precincts. We cannot observe, measure, and count a value. (p.183)

Goldstein further asserts that “life itself is not a hypothetical, linear, statistical experience; our values are not palpable commodities that can be counted, weighed, measured, and inventoried” (ibid). Goldstein and others² who subscribe to a subjective epistemology posit that social work education will be relevant to practice only as far as it equally embraces the subjective and the objective.

In the last thirty years, there has been a renewed call to develop educational models that blend the objectivity of science in the university with the relational artistry in

² See also Rossiter, 1997; Pennell & Ristock, 1999; Abrams & Curran, 2004; Palmer, 2002; and Hämäläinen, 2003.

social work practice (Goldstein, 1990; Leonard, 1994; Imre, 1982) – a sort of blending of the two sides of the rift. Lymbery (2003) believes that “the survival of social work as a distinct professional discipline will depend on its ability to reconcile the apparent contradictions between the discourses of competence and creativity, in particular in the context of social work education” (p.100). This study focuses on the self-reflexive portfolio as a tool that facilitates the blending of practice knowledge and formal academic knowledge, engendering the subjective in social work practice. The discipline of social work education has tended to overlook the inherent value in subjective knowledge; subjectivity has certainly been under-represented in the process of social work education.

The second section of the literature review frames the picture. It articulates the connections between the current state of social work education and the historical foundations, theoretical influences, and traditions from which it developed. What emerges is the relatively steady embedding of positivism and the scientific model into professional social work education. Subjective views and the importance of an individual’s voice ebb and flow over time, but consistently lose ground in relation to a positivist hegemony. Subjectivity is vulnerable largely because it is most frequently found in social work practice focusing on social movements, economic inequality, and personal empowerment. However, the tide is beginning to turn with the emergence of critical theory and a critical social work perspective. These views emphasize that knowledge is subjective, situated in historical time and space, finding a voice in social work education through post-modernism, structuralism, and feminism.

The third section focuses on context. It provides understanding of feminist liberatory pedagogy - a pedagogy that is consistent with a critical perspective to

education and which is consistent with the self-reflexive portfolio. The literature review then focuses on portfolios in social work education. Portfolios address the need for social work education to assist students in engendering the subjective in their social work practice so they can meet the demands of the complex human conditions they encounter as they practice in real world settings. Feminist liberatory pedagogy provides a theoretical foundation from which to work (including the use of portfolios); the self-reflexive portfolio is a tool capable of ameliorating the rift between social work education and practice; between objectivism and subjectivism.

2.2 Social Work Education and Practice Tension

Social work literature reveals a strong theme of tension between social work education and practice.³ It suggests there is disconnect between social work education and the real world of social work practice. "One has only to listen to practitioners to know that the long term rift between practitioners and academicians and researchers has not been narrowed" (Davis, 1985, p.107). The separation between the art and science that began to emerge when social work as a profession was in its nascence still resonates today (Martinez-Brawley, 1999).

Whether in favor of moving education to be more relevant to practice or practice to be more relevant to education, the lament is the same: social work education as it currently exists in the academy is not meeting the needs of those who practice social work. Academics and well published scholars such as Hudson, Gambrill, Thyer, and Curtis "call for a more committed return to the rigorous objectivity of the empirical practice approach, hoping that the remedy for social workers' reliance on practice

³ This tension could also be conceived more generally as a tension between the value placed on sciences versus humanities in Canadian universities (Davidson & Goldberg, 2004).

wisdom might lie in the profession becoming ‘more scientific’” (Sellick, Delaney, & Brownlee, 1999, p.125). Phrases such as ‘evidence-based practice’, ‘core competencies’, and ‘best practice’ have become the catchwords in the academy and perhaps even more common in the practice community. Artistry and fluidity in social work practice are dismissed, often as not good practice. In their place are an emphasis on a classical view of science and a focus on the relation between objective elements of social work practice. “If the fundamental problems of practitioners were interactional and if the world was untidy and fractured, it was only fitting that social work should re-think its exhortations to science at the close of this century” (Martinez-Brawley, 1999, p.337).

One conceptualization of the current tension within social work education and between social work education and practice is through the discourse of voice. In her article *Female and Male Voices in Social Work*, Liane Davis (1985) applies a heuristic of masculine and feminine voices to examine the schism that developed between social work education and practice. Davis contends that the male voice represented in the academy of social work education has as its emphasis: detachment, separateness, autonomy, justice, and abstract and formal mode of thinking. Social work’s search for legitimacy and a knowledge base founded on scientific research denotes the male voice of the academy. The female voice focuses upon intuition, connectedness in relationship, an ethic of care, and a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative, reflected in social work practice. The result, according to Davis’ analysis, has been the over-representation of the male voice in the academy and therefore in models of social work practice, a voice which has been “instrumental in suppressing the female voice in social work” (p.111). Davis posits that the tension between the male and female voice in social

work is a reflection of the emphasis on objectivity over subjectivity, resulting in a tension between social work education and practice.

The schism between education and practice articulated by Liane Davis and others becomes a positivist versus interpretivist dialectic.⁴ Those who argue for an objective empirical model in social work research and education represent the continued influence of the positivist orientation of the male voice articulated by casework and competency social work practice models. On the other side of the social work education debate are those who represent a subjective knowledge embedded in the female voice historically woven on the margins of the academy and articulated by early group work and later critical social work practice. Table 2.1 provides a summary of these two divergent orientations.

There has been a continued growth of a body of literature demonstrating that social work practitioners do not actively embrace objectivity-based models taught in social work education and do not apply them in practice (Payne, 2005; Sheppard, Newstead, Di Caccavo, & Ryan, 2000). An article critiquing technical rationality in three domains: forms of knowledge, context of practice, and problem-solving, leads the authors to conclude “there is no direct correlation between the acquisition of positivist knowledge and competence in practice” (Gould & Harris, 1996, p.224). Despite these and other criticisms,⁵ models based upon objective empiricism remain a continued quest in social work education.

⁴The male versus female heuristic is also applied to considerations of integrating women’s knowledge into social work education. Nichols-Casebolt, Figueira-McDonough, and Netting (2000) state: “The ways that knowledge is constructed in academic institutions,...calls for a major transformation, since women’s realities and experiences have traditionally been marginal or absent in such constructions” (p.67).

⁵ See also, Jarvis, 1983; Whittington, 1986.

Table 2.1 Differing Views of Empirical Knowledge⁶

| <i>Ideology</i> | Positivism | Interpretivism |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Philosophy</i> | Modernism/Scientific | Subjectivism/Humanism/Postmodernism/ Constructionism |
| <i>Research</i> | Quantitative – standardized measures | Qualitative - ethnography |
| <i>Positionality of Researcher</i> | Objectively neutral, detached | Subjectively situated, interactional |
| <i>Voice</i> | Third person/male - logic and autonomy | First person/female - connected and relational |
| <i>Setting</i> | The academy Social work education | The community/relationship Social work practice |
| <i>Social Work Education</i> | Expert - formal knowledge Critical thinking Structured, evaluative | Empowerment - embodied process knowledge Critical consciousness Guided, mentored |
| <i>Research Outcome</i> | Evaluative judgment for generalization | Understanding to empower |
| <i>Models</i> | Eclecticism, Scientist-practitioner, Evidence Based Practice, Competency models | Feminist, radical, structural, reflective practitioner |
| <i>Approach to Theory</i> | Theory arises from academic research and is applied in practice to fix problems | Practice must inform the development and use of theory and theory is used to raise consciousness and create social change |
| <i>Social Work Advocates</i> | Thyer, Hudson, Sheldon, Gambrill, Macdonald | Valentich, Pennell, Saulnier, Mullaly |
| <i>Nature of Social Work</i> | Individual-reformist (maintenance of social order) | Socialist-collectivist (transformational) |
| <i>Pedagogy</i> | Classical/Conventional | Liberatory/Emancipatory/Critical |

⁶ For further explanation of models based upon positivism, see Fisher (1978); Reid and Epstein (1972); Orcutt (1990); Payne (2005); Bloom, Fisher and Orme (1995). For further articulation of subjective position to education, see Lather (1984); Giroux (2003); Cox and Hardwick (2002); Schön (1987); hooks (1994). Whittington and Holland (1985) and Howe (1987) provide a framework for classification of theories.

By resting the claim to the validity of our knowledge on our strict adherence to rules and methods which systematically exclude the subjectivity of the knower, we can produce a context-free, transcendent knowledge which is stripped of the personal and political interests of the knower....Instead we have 'objective' disembodied claims of: "*this is how it is*" [sic]....Rather than negotiate validity for our claim to knowledge, we can simply ordain it. (Sellick et al., 1999, p.122)

The models for practice articulated by this perspective have profoundly influenced social work curriculum and standards of practice articulated by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work,⁷ developed primarily by the social work academy (CASSW, 2004) and entrenched in its male voice (Leonard, 1994). Subjective knowledge evidenced in relationship, connection, and contextual realities has no space in this epistemological positioning.

Proponents for a subjective knowledge base for contemporary social work education argue for the need to shift the academy toward the direction of practice rather than trying to shift practice to the male voice of the academy. From this perspective, the subjective cannot be ignored and we "must continue to see that emotional and moral dimensions are as important as is logic. The hyper-rationality that pervades the university is false consciousness" (Lather, 1984, p.59).

Unlike the positivist empirical knowledge position that education is to train students for competent practice, a critical perspective of education believes in the need to "provide students with possibilities for linking knowledge and social responsibility to the imperatives of a substantive democracy....Learning at its best is connected with the imperatives of social responsibility and political agency" (Giroux, 2003, p.9). Social work practice itself is a type of situated knowledge that is shaped and contextualized in

⁷ Due to space limitations, the standards ascribed to schools of social work in Canada are not included. All the documents in their entirety are available at: [http:// www.cassw.ca](http://www.cassw.ca)

the complexity of the social world. The female voice is prevalent in this situated knowledge and accentuates intuition, artistry, connectedness, and relationship (Davis, 1985). Critical perspectives do not advocate for the replacement of the female over the male voice or superiority of one type of knowledge over another. Rather they argue for the use and balance of all types of knowledge and recognition that there are multiple ways of knowing and coming to know (Davis, 1985; Cox & Hardwick, 2002). "Our task is to honor the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity in both our teaching and our research" (Lather, 1984, p.59).

This gap between practice and education has been called a 'chasm' (Mullen, 2002), a 'rift' (Davis, 1985), or the 'squeeze-play' (Schön, 1987) and has been conceptualized as an 'estrangement between knowing and doing' (Fraser & Taylor, 1991). As Schön (1987) notes, "the growing power of technical rationality...reduces the professional school's disposition to educate students for artistry in practice and increases its disposition to train them as technicians" (p.315). Over time, many in the university setting have come to subjugate the practice wisdom of the field, preferring to relegate knowledge generated by empirical science as the primary social work agenda (Imre, 1982; Saleebey, 1989). A hierarchical order of knowledge has emerged (Rein & White, 1981). "The rules of exclusion that have operated so powerfully in social work to privilege forms and sources of knowledge that are Eurocentric, patriarchal, and bourgeois are an essential means of ideological domination" (Leonard, 1994, p.22). The objective male voice, dominant in the academy, generates knowledge based upon the scientific method. The practitioner is viewed as the 'handmaiden' of the scientist, representing the subjective female voice whose duty it is to apply the scientific

knowledge in the various practice settings (Schön, 1983; Martinez-Brawley, 1999). The question becomes how social work as a profession has arrived at such a disparate state of affairs where professional social work education is fractured between positivist and interpretivist perspectives, with positivism being dominant.

2.3 The History of Social Work Education

The theoretical influences shaping the tension between objectivism and subjectivism in the academic setting are woven throughout history, including social work education (Penna, 2004). Significant in this is how social work education has come full circle, from juggling the different agendas historically driven by either an agenda of social control or social emancipation, to the entrenchment in a positivist epistemology, and back to a growing recognition to incorporate a connected form of knowing and knowledge building into the university setting. There are essentially two paradigms present in social work: positivism, largely supported by the Charity Organization Society movement and later by social casework; and the interpretivist paradigm, largely supported by the Settlement House Movement and later philosophically aligned with the emergence of critical social work. While it is clear in the following sections that social work education is fundamentally founded upon the articulation of techniques and skills influenced by positivism for application in practice, it is also clear that throughout this process there are those who question this. The questioning is an extension of the philosophical base articulated by the early Settlement House workers and is represented by critical social theorists, post-modernists, and post-structuralists. These academics challenge the positivist epistemology upon which social work education professes to rest. The last couple of decades have witnessed an emerging critical pedagogy in social work

education, articulating a call for educators to challenge the very system in which education occurs and to model or practice what they profess to teach. This need for congruence in what they say they do and what they actually do is the crux of the tension in social work education between the often-opposing voices of positivism and interpretivism.

2.3.1 The Positivist Paradigm

It is common knowledge that social work emerged as a profession in the modern era with the advent of the social ills of mass urbanization and industrialization (Kendall, 1995). Two fundamental approaches emerged to working with the disenfranchised in society. Each has a different epistemological understanding of the human condition.

One approach was the 'friendly visitors' of the Charity Organization Societies (COS) championed by social work pioneers such as Mary Richmond. Influenced by thinkers of the time such as Freud and psychoanalysis, Mary Richmond, in her 1917 seminal work *Social Diagnosis* laid the foundation for the focus on the positivist paradigm prevalent in social work education. She was a strong believer in the need for social work to move towards a medical model where clinical detachment and diagnosis-cure of the individual was to be the primary focus (Palmer, 2002). Richmond supported the notion that individuals were the cause of their own social problems and that in order to improve poverty and sickness the individual first must be cured of her/his ailments. With Richmond's influence, social casework, still the prevalent stream in both undergraduate and graduate educational programs today, took hold. Richmond's work was the reflection of the Western cultural values of paternalism, productivity, and rationalism embedded in the thinking of the times (Healy, 2004; Midgley, 1981). "From

the outset, social work in Canada and the United States was conceived as a means of effecting moral reform guided by scientific knowledge, rather than the vagaries of a charitable impulse” (Pennell & Ristock, 1999, p.19). The scientific paradigm was perceived as the opportunity for the profession to obtain legitimacy at a time when there was opportunity for social work, and other caring professions, such as nursing, to enter into the esteemed halls of the university setting.

The second fundamental approach to working with people emerged from a more subjectively situated epistemology in the form of the Settlement House Movement (SHM) and the works of pioneers such as Jane Addams. This epistemology was subjectively situated in that it described, “a process whereby...individual states and objective statuses are transformed into a social subject, a subject marked by his/her capacity for self-determination, responsible citizenship etc.” (Featherstone, 2001, p.1). The SHM believed in examination of the social conditions contributing to the disenfranchisement of large groups of people in society and used social action approaches to achieve political change rather than a focus on individual treatment. The cause versus function debate, that social change through political action is the goal (SHM) or individual change through application of technical skills is the goal (COS), was to divide the newly emerging profession into two distinct arenas (Edwards, Shera, Reid, & York, 2006).

One was the concept of the scientific, methodical, restrained professional, dealing with individual clients one by one, as does the physician or lawyer. The other was the concept of the spirited advocate, gathering systematic information about social evils and joining in or leading campaigns for reform. (Handel, 1982, p.219)

Despite these differences, the Settlement House workers and the Charity Organization Society workers joined in 1904 to form the National Conference of Charities and

Correction (Handel, 1982).

The emerging tension between the humanist ideals of social work based upon human values and that of positivist ideals of rational objectivity came to the foreground of the profession with the rise of the universities in Europe and North America (Edwards et al., 2006). This shifted social work education and practice away from an apprentice based training approach into formal academic preparation (Turner & Turner, 2005).

The movement toward a scientific discipline produced paradoxical consequences for the profession: on the one hand, this approach elevated social work's professional status; on the other hand, social work's autonomy and unique mission were restricted in favor of psychiatry and related therapeutic fields. (Lubove, 1965, as cited in Abrams & Curran, 2004, p.432)

The address to the forty-second meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in Baltimore given by Abraham Flexner in 1915 solidified the social casework model in the forefront of the social work profession (Leighninger, 1987). Flexner, who had scathingly reported on medical schools across the United States for their lack of systematic research and scant knowledge base, addressed the assembly on whether or not social work met the criteria of a profession (Kirk & Reid, 2002). He concluded that social work, while an intellectual activity, was not a profession (Holosko, 2003). This proclamation was to preoccupy social work over the next several decades for it spoke to social work's own recognition of its vulnerability in having the two conflicting perspectives posited by the SHM or COS workers.

The struggle with identity and legitimacy was fracturing social work into two diverse epistemological positions, and distancing the scientific individual philanthropy from social reform. Mary Richmond and others decided to rise to the task of furthering the professional standards of social work education in the scientific paradigm. The

casework method and its promise for systematization, articulation of specific skills, and marriage to specific theories, such as psychoanalysis, was seen by many as the perfect solution to moving social work toward becoming a profession (Leighninger, 1987). Professional education, based on notions of objective casework methods and graduate training, was to replace the passionate involved work of Jane Addams and others from the social reform movement.

The emphasis on objective science was solidified following World War I, when the quest to professionalize the voluntary organizations of charity “mirrored efforts to dissociate the emerging occupation of social work from its maternal feminist roots and to adopt a more scientific, rational approach” (Turner & Turner, 2005, p.140). The move into universities was perceived as the perfect platform in which to legitimize and heighten the profession’s status (Sewpaul, 2005). The ‘rank and file’ were women who typically trained the new professionals in the field (Stotzer & Tropman, 2006). Men were given the teaching and research function in the university setting and professional associations deliberately set out to recruit men into leadership positions to further the legitimacy ‘cause’ (Leighninger, 1987).

Although some pioneers, like Mary Richmond and Alice Salomon believed in training in the field, it was Richmond’s model of social casework that was first adopted by schools of social work in the university setting (Hämäläinen, 2003; Leighninger, 1987). It was not until 1967 that a university was to place community organization as one of its educational foci (Leighninger, 1987). The influences of the scientific model signaled the development of a strong affinity to objective empiricism in the academy and application of it in practice settings. The male voice of rational detachment and objective

study is evident in the scientific casework model taught at universities. The focus on procedures and techniques further distances the female voice of relational connectedness in practice. As early as 1927, Dr. Helen Reid, a Montreal social work educator, reflected on the importance of identifying with the male scientific model.

In her address to the Canadian Conference on Social Work, Reid categorized two groups of women in social work: female philanthropists and volunteers, whom she described as traditionalists, obstructionist, and sentimentalists, and the 'new scientific woman', the expert social worker committed to economy and efficiency. (Rooke & Schnell, 1982, as cited in Baines, Evans, & Neysmith, 1998, p.36)

The female voice of social work practice that influenced social work education in recognizing a more subjectively based knowledge, emerged within the services offered by the SHM and grew out of it in the 1930s and 1940s. A grass roots⁸ movement drawing heavily on the progressive education teachings of John Dewey⁹ was beginning to be articulated as a method, primarily by Grace Coyle (1930) beginning with *Social Process in Organized Groups* (Skidmore, Thackery, Farley, Smith, & Boyle, 2000). The objective of group work was to "encourage growth of responsibility to the larger society and to thereby enable 'socially intelligent citizens' to accomplish social change in a democratic way" (Coyle, as cited in Handel, 1982, p.226), stressing social and not just individual change (Leighninger, 1987; Handel, 1982). The eventual acceptance of a group work stream at the Western Reserve University School of Applied Social Sciences came after some criticism from those married to the casework model of practice and its

⁸ Grass roots is defined as "the public, especially the voters, who provide the basic support for a political movement of social cause" (Barker, 1999, p.199).

⁹ Dewey (1938) in *Experience and Education* describes education as preparation for democracy and as a part of general growth and development.

scientific methods.¹⁰ Group work gave social work education the opportunity to move the field away from a singular emphasis on character building and a deficit model, toward an emphasis on the development of the personality through group experience. At a time of increasing emphasis on the objective science in the academy, this potential of valuing subjective knowledge did not come to fruition.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the different schools of social work articulating different methods for different fields of practice. Social workers were becoming specialized into different fields of practice, including medical, psychiatric, group work, corrections, school, and community. When the Milford conference in 1929 called for the social work profession to unite through the casework approach, schools across North America further embraced the scientific paradigm, leaving the subjective behind (Holosko, 2003). In 1951, the Hollis-Taylor Report was commissioned by the Council on Social Work Education declaring the need for graduate level training in the medical model for professional social workers (Brieland, 1977; Leighninger, 1987). These two historical influences, along with Flexner's earlier declaration, continued to enshrine objectivism in the academy at the expense of the subjective. Education continued to focus upon the furthering of the positivist scientific model in its quest for legitimacy and articulation of its own knowledge base (Goldstein, 1990). Given the historical construction of the problem as social work's failure to meet the standards defining a profession, the prescription becomes a singular focus on objectivity and embracing the scientific method, effectively dismissing and silencing the value of subjective knowledge

¹⁰ For example, Edith Abbott likened group work to "games, gymnastics, and sewing" and Charlotte Towle disparaged its acceptance into the university, stating "They never have had anything that was worth much at Western Reserve" (as cited in Leighninger, 1987, p.157).

in social work practice. The tide of social work in a political economy that was embracing laissez-faire capitalism and the scientific ethos was so pervasive that the voice of the spirited advocate was to sit on the margins of the profession. As professional social workers became educated in the positivist milieu of the academy, clinical casework was to win out over the need for advocacy and activism. “Given its birth during the period of modernity with its emphasis on reductionist logical-positivist rationality, it is not surprising that social work took on this dominant discourse in the pursuit of status and professionalism” (Sewpaul, 2005, p.211). This dominant discourse has included a number of different articulations over the past decades, including the Scientific-Practitioner articulated by Fisher (1981) through to the current model strongly advocated by Gambrill (2006), known as the Evidence-Based Practice Model.

2.3.2 The Interpretivist Paradigm

The influence of the scientific paradigm adopted in the academic world was not without its critics. A second paradigm that was evident and shared a similar, albeit more radical philosophical perspective to that espoused by the Settlement House Movement (SHM), was critical social theory. Like the SHM, critical social theory evolved primarily outside of the mainstream academy, gaining popularity during times of high social and economic problems, receding into the background during times of optimism, such as that of post-war Europe. Purposefully oriented toward radical change in direct opposition to the influences of positivistic science, critical social theory was developed by a group of intellectuals working with the Institute for Social Research (now known as the Frankfurt School) established in Germany in 1923 (Agger, 1991). The school provided a place where radical philosophers, economists, and sociologists could develop ideas closely

linked to Marxism and the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant¹¹ (McLaughlin, 1999).

Critical theorists, such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Pollok, and Benjamin, rejected positivism as a worldview of adjustment (Agger, 1991). "Positivism suggests that one can perceive the world without making assumptions about the nature of the phenomena under investigation. Its notion that knowledge can simply reflect the world leads to the uncritical identification of reality and rationality" (Agger, 1991, p.109). Critical theorists accuse social science steeped in positivism of failing humanity in its "uncritical identification of reality and rationality" (ibid).

The work of critical theorist Habermas (1971) took an even firmer position against Marxism in his affirmation that "Marx failed to distinguish carefully enough between knowledge gained from causal analysis (causal/technical rationality) and knowledge gained from self-reflection and interaction (communication)" (Agger, 1991, p.110). Historically valuing causal analysis as the only legitimate knowledge, social work education embraces the rational as supporting social work's quest for legitimacy in the academy that houses it. The interactive knowledge, gained in social work practice, separates itself from this agenda. This distinction between types and purpose of different knowledge is evident throughout the emergence of critical theories in the 1970s and into the 1980s.¹²

Habermas (1987) firmly placed critical theory into an emancipatory agenda in *The*

¹¹ Kant used the term 'critique' to mean philosophical reflection on the limits of claims made for certain kinds of knowledge and a direct connection between such critique and the emphasis on moral autonomy. Critical theory meant to rehabilitate through its critical approach an orientation toward the possibility of emancipatory action. See Kant's (1998) *Critique of pure reason*, (Guyer & Woods, Trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1781).

¹² Social work education uses practice wisdom or tacit knowledge versus formal knowledge as its distinction, with a clear emphasis of value and therefore worth for the formal knowledge ascribed by education rather than the wisdom gained in the field (Schön, 1983).

Theory of Communicative Action where, among other concepts, he articulates society as split between the 'lifeworld' and 'system' (Cox & Hardwick, 2002; Houston & Campbell, 2001). The lifeworld is those processes, such as socialization and culture that are the essence of family and the public arena. The system is the economy and state administration. It was Habermas' belief that the lifeworld had become disconnected and separate from the system with its success driven orientation (Cox & Hardwick, 2002). Social work as a profession exists in this paradox, education driven by a success orientation, practice by the lifeworld processes. This metaphor provides further conceptualization of the dualistic nature in social work as it experiences tension between an agenda of empowerment or social control, indicative of separation between lifeworld and system. Critical theory's influence on social work and the emergence of other theories, such as post-structuralism, post-modernism, and feminism "indicate its important place in the development of the social work profession" (Calhoun, 1985 as cited in McLaughlin, 1999).

2.4 Theoretical Developments Questioning Positivism

Post-Modernism/Post-Structuralism is a philosophy that arose in Europe as a contradiction and critique to the positivist scientific method.¹³ Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and other notable philosophers of the 19th century stressed subjectivity, experience, and relativity over absolutism and a universal truth (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Anti-reductionist and pluralist, post-modernism is most closely associated with

¹³ While post-modernism and post-structuralism contain subtleties that differentiate them, I have opted to discuss them together for their shared critique of the position of positivism. I perceive post-structuralism as one extension of the more general post-modern idea of rejection of grand-narratives. Lather (1991) in *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern* also chooses to use these terms interchangeably.

Lyotard (1984)¹⁴ and informed the writings and work of Michel Foucault. Lyotard represents the post-modernist position of the rejection of ‘grand-narratives’, and “maintains that one cannot tell large stories about the world but only small stories from the heterogeneous ‘subject positions’ of individuals and plural groups” (Agger, 1991, p.116). Foucault adds to the understanding of post-modern thought in his use and analysis in everyday life. Foucault’s analysis of discourse was placed into differential positions based upon a hierarchy of knowledge associated with power (Payne, 2005). Who becomes the authoritative voice is the person who has the most power within that situational context. Foucault’s advanced notions on power and knowledge construction add to the post-modern position in the complexity and historical placement of situated knowledge (Leonard, 1994). Social work education’s placement in a university setting led to academic scholars becoming the authoritative voice of knowledge transmitted and considered legitimate in the social work profession. However, post-modernism advocates the embracing of multiple realities and multiple ways of explaining the world that take into account class, race, gender, and other affiliations (Agger, 1991; Pennell & Ristock, 1999; Roseneau, 1992). This implies the need to situate both objectively and subjectively derived knowledge on an equal standing within the social work knowledge system, creating meaningful conversation between the worlds of practice and education.

Post-structuralism is a theory within the post-modern movement that focuses upon language as a text in people’s lives using deconstructionism. Derrida and the French feminists are most closely associated with this theory (Agger, 1991). Deconstructionism

¹⁴ Lyotard wrote *The Post-modern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* that has become a seminal work for the post-modern thinking on central issues of modernism’s totalizing perspective and the post-modern position that all knowledge is relative and situationally placed (Agger, 1991).

is a technique to reveal values and agendas hidden beneath the surface of science because all things are constructions of reality rather than a mirror of it (Natoli, 1997). Derrida argues for the need to embrace and search out difference rather than reliance on unitary narratives that provide a singular explanatory text (Grosz, 1989; Hutcheon, 1988; Sands & Nuccio, 1992). In this sense, there is no expert authority on any subject, but rather, human beings can author their own text and story, ascribing meaning to it based upon their own unique circumstances (Lather, 1991). This research study is nested in the larger post-modernist frame influenced by critical social theory exploring how subjectively driven knowledge gained through portfolio courses offered in the educational setting informs social work practice, transcending the historic boundary between the objectivity in education and subjectivity in practice.

2.5 The Emergence of Critical Social Work

Critical social work emerged as a perspective embedded within concepts drawn from critical theory. Radical, Feminist, and Structural social work share influences of a critical transformational perspective and each has contributed key concepts to social work practice and education (Payne, 2005; Finn & Jacobson, 2003).¹⁵ In addition to notions of power differences, diversity, oppression, and a structural analysis of society, these theories have applied and influenced ideas of praxis, reflection/reflexivity, and the this conceptualization, including critical consciousness, reflexivity, and praxis form the foundation for exploration into how portfolio courses as a pedagogical tool, inform

¹⁵ The different movements in the humanities influence social work in both the United States and Canada; there has been an historical linkage to the BSW degree and the humanities. Students typically are required to take courses in the humanities before specializing in social work in the third and fourth year of their studies. See *Social work and the Liberal Arts: Renewing the Commitment* by Reid & Pebbles-Wilkins, 1991.

application of Paulo Freire's 'conscientisation' in social work.¹⁶ The key constructs of engendering the subjective in social work practice. The actualization of these constructs in social work education addresses the need for congruence between education and practice. Figure 2.1 provides a conceptualization of how critical theory informs a critical social work perspective.^{17,18}

Originating with Marxist thought, praxis is concerned with the joining of theory with practice. "The idea of praxis means that we must implement theories in practice, so that practice reflects on and alters theory" (Payne, 2005, p.231). One of the ways to connect education with practice is with pedagogical tools designed to engage students in a process of praxis. In contrast to the dominant approach to social work, praxis focuses upon transformative possibilities, is collaborative, participatory, and is a process of action, reflection, and theorizing that is continuous and overlapping (Lather, 1991). The notion of praxis emphasizes the need to develop theory and methods in practice rather than removed from it. This requires a fundamental shift in the perception of the academy as the purveyor of knowledge relevant to practice. Central to praxis in social work from a transformational perspective is engaging in reflexivity. Reflexivity is "taken to mean that people have to think about their own concepts and what they bring to a situation. In

¹⁶ Saleebey & Scanlon (2005) in their article *Is Critical Pedagogy for the Profession of Social Work Possible?* discuss three roots of critical social work including the work of the Frankfurt School, Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony, and the Educational Theory of Paulo Friere. Their perspective is broad, I have chosen to narrow the focus to Marx's notion of praxis, Schön's reflectivity, and Freire's conscientisation as key constructs in contemporary critical social work in Canada.

¹⁷ While the concepts are presented discretely, they mutually inform one another and are not meant to represent the historical emergence linearly but rather how social work has been influenced by concepts loosely informed by critical theory.

¹⁸ While radical social work practice theory originates mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, radical social work emerged in times of economic difficulty such as the great depression and therefore the 1920-1930s are recognized as the starting point in the figure (Payne, 2005). For an excellent review of the influence of applied radical social work in the rank and file movement, see Leighninger, 1987.

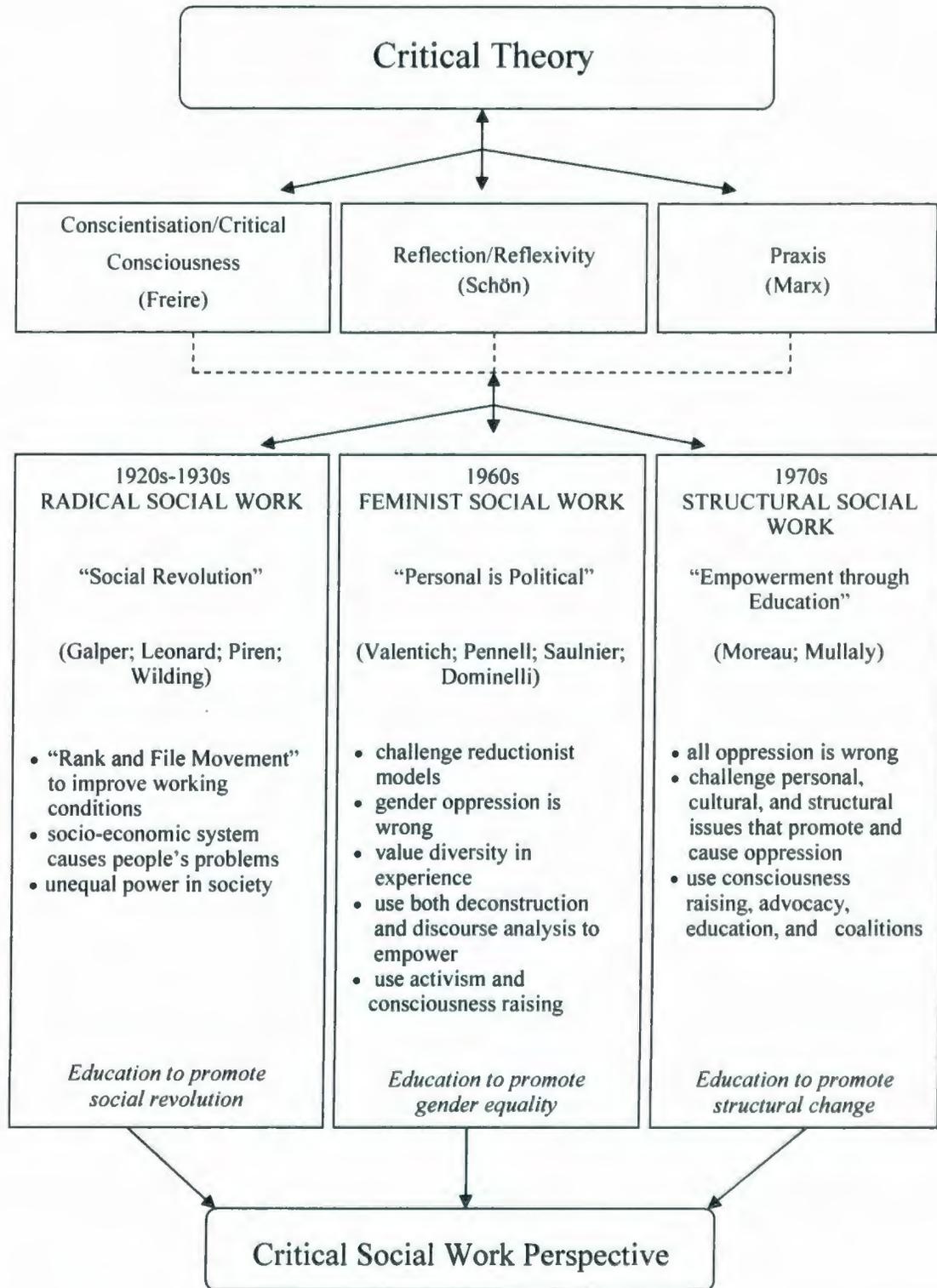


Figure 2.1 Critical Theory and Critical Social Work

contrast to the view that people can be objective, reflexivity argues that we have a social and intellectual unconsciousness - and consciousness - that we bring to any situation" (Matthew & Jessel, 1998, p.61). The focus is on the self and one's assumptions. Reflexive awareness "stems from the post-modernists' view that one's observations and reflections are always seen through the lens of personal values and experiences as well as through social and cultural contexts. Therefore, one's view of others is never completely objective" (Ringel, 2003, p.19). The current study seeks to explore this reflexivity from the perspective of the practitioners who engaged in portfolio courses in their education. The application of reflexivity in practice and education is central to engaging in a critical transformational perspective.

The work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and social activist, further expands a critical perspective to social work practice and education. Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, articulates both the ideas of praxis and conscientisation. To Freire, reflection and action, the process of praxis, must go together in order to speak a true word and transform the world. "When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers...and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism* [sic], into an alienated and alienating 'blah' ...there is not transformation without action" (p.87). Conscientisation, on the other hand, is the process of moving from object to subject, from victim to empowered social agent nurtured through a group dialogue process (Reed & Newman, 1997; Carr, 2003). The self-reflexive portfolio courses used as the pedagogical tool for engendering the subjective in social work education use a group dialogue process throughout course delivery. The central tenets of praxis, reflexivity, and

critical consciousness/conscientisation are woven - sometimes tacitly and sometimes explicitly - throughout the different articulations of critical social work.

Radical social workers, such as Peter Leonard (1975) in *A Paradigm for Radical Practice*, emphasize the importance of education in promoting social revolutions. "The key task of radical practice is an educational one. This role aims at contributing to the development in people...of a critical consciousness of their oppression and of their potential, with others, of combating this oppression" (as cited in Galper, 1980, p.117). The criticism of radical social work is its failure to specify methods to achieve change and for its emphasis on collectivism rather than individualism. However, its fundamental ideological position against oppression, the questioning of power in relationships, the need to change the social order for the betterment of all people, is embedded in both feminist and structural approaches to social work practice.¹⁹ For those who hold a critical perspective, social work is a political act where "collective solutions to the problems are sought, not *for* [sic] others, but *with* [sic] them" (Galper, 1980, p.9). The context of oppression and marginalization is a fundamental consideration in a person's situation or life circumstance.²⁰ This consideration extends to student experiences in and of the educational system in which they learn social work and speaks to the need for congruence between what is taught, how it is taught, and how this translates into social work practice. Pedagogical tools such as the self-reflexive portfolio are aiming to achieve this congruence.

¹⁹ Recognizing there are other articulated perspectives using a radical approach, such as Fook's (2000) critical social work that use similar ideas to critical social theory and radical social work as found in structural and feminist theories. Fook articulates rethinking our ideas about: knowing, power, discourse/language/narrative, and identity and difference (Payne, 2005).

²⁰ For example, Ife (1997) articulates a critical perspective to both the historical and current challenges of social work in addressing structural inequalities.

Critical social work perspectives share similarity in emphasizing education as key to challenging and overcoming oppression. Feminist theories use deconstruction and discourse analysis²¹ as tools to examine the structural forces in society that serve to marginalize and oppress women while holding others in positions of power and privilege. Structural social work believes inequality falls “along lines of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, ability, and geographical region” (Mullaly, 1997, p.133). Whether advocating social revolution, gender equality, or empowerment; critical perspectives stress using education to bring about structural change in society (Payne, 2005; Larabee, 1993; Harding, 1991; Mullaly, 2002; Galper, 1980). Collective action, in the form of consciousness raising,²² advocacy, education, coalitions, and a reconstructed social work counseling approach that is consumer rather than worker driven is the goal of a critical perspective in social work (Heinonen & Spearman, 2006).

Critical perspectives in social work, with the exception of Mullaly’s structural social work, developed outside the mainstream academy, where both the perspective and the people ascribing to it were marginalized. Feminist social work arose in the context of the rape crisis centers, battered women’s shelters, and women’s aid organizations (Featherstone, 2001). According to Gordon (1986) there has been a “thick and complex history of feminist involvement in...moral reform (anti-prostitution)...in campaigns for industrial protective legislation and affirmative action” (as cited in Featherstone, 2001, p.75). The 1960s and 1970s protest movements led to the growth of radical social work

²¹ Deconstruction is defined as “taking apart social categories as a way of seeing how one’s world is constructed whereas discourse analysis examines language and ideologies...allowing us to look at how language operates to sustain oppressive practices” (Ristock & Pennell, 1996, p.6).

²² This concept borrows from feminist theory and adult education and denotes reflection in search of understanding dehumanizing social structures and action aimed at altering societal conditions (Heinonen & Spearman, 2006).

where social workers became involved in the promotion of radical changes to social institutions (Lavalette, Penketh, & Ferguson, 1997). Radical social work was marginalized as the larger social protests went into retreat beginning in the 1980s (ibid). Echoing the work of the Settlement House Movement and embedded with concepts from critical theory, radical social work and the later emergence of feminist social work influenced the development of a structural approach articulated in social work education as a model for social work practice. These perspectives have directly influenced the present need for social work to revisit the historic tension between objective and subjective knowledge in social work education and practice with the aim of making education more relevant to practice.

Social work education has come full circle. Training began in the field, in real world settings. Later, the move to the university leads to a strong disassociation with the heart of practice and an embrace with the head of positivist educational models. Today, the circle is turning back onto itself and revisiting its historic roots in practice with the opportunity to incorporate a critical social work perspective within the educational milieu. It is a time of optimism and hope, where educators can consider reconnective possibilities to begin a process of inclusion of both positivism and subjectivism. "Pushing out, softening, and reshaping the boundaries of social work knowledge and practice create room for alternative views. It no longer makes sense to speak of 'science' or 'practice' which become plural and loose" (Pennell & Ristock, 1999, p.475). While a professor may have little direct influence on curriculum changes or changes to the value of the subjective in the university setting, she/he does have direct control over how to teach. Pedagogy is one tool to use in reinserting the value of the subjective in social work

education.

2.6 Reconnective Possibilities

Pedagogy is significant to the current study in its intent. Pedagogy is how social work educators articulate their ascription to a subjective or objective understanding of education and practice.²³ As a social work educator, I situate myself in the subjective realm of understanding and as such, infuse this lens into my pedagogical approach in the classroom setting.

The objectivity versus subjectivity debate in social work education significantly influences standpoints toward pedagogy. On the one side are those steeped in classical pedagogy,²⁴ on the other those who espouse the need for critical pedagogy in social work education. Classical pedagogy is an extension of the male voice in the academy, viewing the teacher as the authority and purveyor of expert knowledge, the student a passive recipient (Giroux, 2003). Students demonstrate receipt of the knowledge through examination and academic essays. Situated in a normative context, all students, independent of culture, age, or lived experience, must meet the same set of 'objective' criteria to provide adequate evidence that they will conform to the standards set by the academy and therefore the profession. Fundamental to this pedagogical approach is a

²³ Pedagogy is the use of various approaches and strategies to stimulate learning (Schniedewind, 1987) Pedagogy is deliberately chosen as portfolio is one approach to stimulate learning rather than andragogy (theories of adult learning). Andragogy, distinct from pedagogy, recognizes that: 1. the learner must balance life responsibilities with the demands of learning, 2. learners are autonomous and self-directed and therefore teachers guide the learner to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts 3. learners have a tremendous amount of life experiences [and] need to connect the learning to their knowledge base (Knowles, 1984; Zemke & Zemke, 1984). Andragogy is a complementary fit to a feminist worldview.

²⁴My choice of 'classical' rather than 'traditional' or 'conventional' is intentional. To call what is Western European pedagogy "traditional" is to diminish the traditional nature of the knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples and reflects an imperialist and colonialist history of when 'tradition' began. Conversely, 'conventional' implies superiority of verificationist ideas of education and that those 'unconventional' do not quite fit or are negatively deviant.

belief that “valid knowledge is generated through objective study detached from personal passions and political strife” (Pennell & Ristock, 1999, p.471). Classical pedagogy uses approaches to stimulate learning that are bracketed by Western European thinking, positivist notions of reality, logic, and rules.

Classical pedagogy has been criticized for its failure to point to “the ideological sources of all knowledge, leav[ing] students as easy victims to that culture which promises ideologically informed solutions to the modern pathology of the crumbling or fragmenting self” (Tingle, 1992, p.17).²⁵ The foundation of classical pedagogy in the objectively masculine voice of the academy has led to an emphasis on the teacher as the expert. “Learning here means acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders....That which is taught is thought of as essentially static...as a finished product” (Dewey, 1938, p.19). Education in scientific methods is about the removal of emotion to achieve understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In contrast to research focusing on scientific objectivity, social work practice is about relationship and meaningful interactions that involve a complex array of emotions. The very emotionality of the processes involved that is the foundation for social and individual change and the rational can inform the plan for change (Lather, 1991; Davis, 1985). The recognition of a much more fluid and artistic form of knowledge will provide opportunity for social work education to be expansive, inclusive, and relationally centered (Parton, 2003). Social work education needs to value and articulate both the subjective emotion and the objective rational and to fulfill its commitment to society. This is the challenge that is yet to be met.

²⁵ For further elucidation of the critique against classical pedagogy see also Shapiro, 1981; Ristock & Pennell, 1996.

The voice for the use of critical pedagogy in social work education is represented in the subjective view of knowledge. Fundamental to this perspective is a belief that education needs to transform and place at the forefront the reflective knowledge of the knower, not the teacher. It is not so much 'what' is taught, but 'how' it is taught that will empower or disempower, expand or limit, instruct or construct knowledge. Advocates for critical pedagogy in education include scholars from the post-modern, post-structuralist, and feminist perspectives, demanding "to make the pedagogical more political by identifying the link between learning and social transformation" (Giroux, 2003, p.7). One extension of a subjective, critical approach to social work education that is representative of the female voice valuing connection and relationship is feminist liberatory pedagogy.

Feminist pedagogy is a series of applied principles or ideas about the learning environment rather than a theoretical construction of it. Webb, Allen, and Walker (2002) provide six principles of feminist pedagogy:

1. empowerment
2. reformation of the professor-student relationship
3. building community
4. privileging the individual voice
5. respect for diversity of personal experience
6. challenging traditional views

Feminist pedagogy brings the principles of a feminist worldview into education through its focus upon relationship, community, voice, and celebration of difference (Welch, 1994; Weiner, 1994). The feminist classroom environment "envelopes a participatory, democratic process that enables all voices, no matter how tremulous or tentative, to be heard" (Shrewsbury, 1987, as cited in Dore, 1994, p.101). All participants are actively engaged with the material being studied, with self and other, and with the external world in ways that facilitate mutual growth and construction of knowledge (ibid). This learning

environment is complementary to the very constructs of inclusion, acceptance of difference, and empowerment espoused in social work practice (Jackson, 1997) and embraces an ethic of care (Larabee, 1993). “In contrast to the tradition of abstract and instrumental reasoning where the pursuit of knowledge is intertwined with the pursuit of control – it underlies the importance of sensory knowledge, symbolized by the unity of hand, head, and heart” (Parton, 2003, p.11). Of most significance in feminist pedagogy is the inherent value placed upon the student collaborator and the learning process rather than the teaching method and theoretical content.

The concept of liberatory goes beyond the principles of feminist pedagogy and is denotative of value. That is, not only what the classroom environment is and the transformation of relationship but rather my intent in using feminist pedagogy as my lens in social work education. Firstly, educators must be conscious of a need to liberate self as well as the need for students to liberate their own subjective voice from the position of expert authority to engage in co-created knowledge (Dore, 1994). The use of feminist liberatory pedagogy in social work education challenges educators to consider their positionality, to engage in what is “at once an inward process of self-examination and self-exploration, and an outward process of understanding and situating oneself in the world” (Reed & Newman, 1997, p.58). Educators must evaluate how their actions emancipate students as unique, self-determined individuals or reinforce the status quo in the politicized dominance of the educational environment (Giroux, 2003). To embrace learning as a journey in itself, to guide rather than lead, to empower rather than instill, to open rather than shape, is the challenge of the feminist liberatory class environment. The social work profession needs to be consistent and congruent to the values upon which it

professes to rest.²⁶ These values include social justice, anti-oppressive and inclusionary practice, embracing of diversity, and recognition of the uniqueness of each human being. The application of feminist liberatory pedagogy is one way to begin to merge the feminine and masculine voice in social work education and practice.

The historical legacy of the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement House Movement, coupled with the influences of different social theories, philosophies, and social movements have resulted in a schism between social work education and practice. This schism is also present within education reflected in either a positivist or interpretivist position to knowledge creation and dissemination through pedagogical practices. Social work needs to move beyond recognition of the differences and documentation of the schism between practice and education, researcher and clinician. It is time to move from the margins to the center (hooks, 2000). The current research seeks to bring a critical perspective forward from the female voice of relationship and connectedness in application of principles of feminist liberatory pedagogy in the social work classroom.

2.7 The Self-Reflexive Portfolio

Pedagogies can move social work education and practice towards working in unison rather than parallel but distant paths. The student portfolio is designed to enhance education as transformation in a liberatory journey toward effective social work practice. The self-reflexive portfolio is one pedagogical tool that can be employed to bridge the gap between social work education and practice.

²⁶ Refer to the Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for further elucidation of social work values and practices <http://www.casw.ca>

2.7.1 What are Portfolios?

Portfolios evolved out of a sense of needing to shift toward learner centered learning and assessment techniques. Wolf (1991) defines portfolio assessment as a “depository of artifacts” that at some point requires “written reflection by the developer on the significance or contributions of those artifacts to the attributes of interest” (p.36). The portfolio creator, in consultation with the course instructor, determines what is classified as an artifact. Artifacts can consist of various documents, projects, constructions, videotapes, audiotapes, poetry, artwork, or stories (Newke, 1991; Karoly, 1996). Jarvinen and Kohonen (1995) offer a more specific definition of portfolio:

A portfolio is a purposeful collection of work that exhibits the learner’s efforts, progress, and achievements. In the course of learning, the portfolio becomes a kind of autobiography of growth. By learning to organize their learning experiences for themselves and sharing them with others they were able to get a deeper understanding of themselves. The portfolio helps the learner extract meaning from the experience by analytic reflection. It will increase the students’ involvement, responsibility and ownership for his/her learning. (as cited in Taylor Thomas, & Sage, 1999, p.149)

Portfolios are, above all, “a process, product, and tool” (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004, p.93). Self-reflexive portfolios engage the student in a process of reflection and meaning. They are a product as they contain one or a number of delineated artifacts carefully chosen to be representative of some aspect of learning, experience, or knowledge. They are a tool to assist the student in coming to know her/him self differently and in relation to different experiences.

The use and support for portfolios in social work education mirror the tension between the purposes of education and practice – that of the critically reflective practitioner or the competent social worker (Taylor et al., 1999). The literature on

portfolios in social work education tends to take the position that portfolios are either a formative or a summative assessment of a student's acquisition of core competencies.

In their initial application in educational settings, portfolios were conceptualized as formative learning. "Initially, portfolios emphasized personal achievement and development, broadening the range of what was conventionally recognized as valuable in education to include the value of the experiential. The early focus was on personal gain to individuals...encouraging individuals by building confidence in their achievements" (Taylor et al., 1999, p.149). The notions of confidence building, of celebrating individual strengths, and facilitating the development of personal meaning and insight (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004) are consistent with the mission of social work practice from within an emancipatory perspective. Portfolio requires interpretation and the search for personal meaning and the presentation of oneself to others (ibid).

There has been a breadth of application in the use of portfolios to assist students in developing self-reflection skills. Several universities in Britain, most notably the University of Bristol, have adopted portfolios in social work education as a means to assist students in development of self-reflection skills and in integrating learning into social care settings (Graham & Megarry, 2005; Swigonski, Ward, Mama, Rodgers, & Belicose, 2006; Burgess, Baldwin, Dalrymple, & Thomas, 1999). The focus of portfolios on individualized reflection and learning, allowing for independent critical thinking skills, professional development, and personal growth has eroded in recent years.

Conceptualizations of portfolios are shifting with the focus on competency and evidence-based practice, and now tend to include a summative evaluation of learning. Elliot (2003) for example, believes all portfolios must contain written commentaries that

“comment both on the documentary evidence and on issues of underlying values, theory, research, policy, professional, and career development” (p.328). Others stress how portfolios are a means to enhance a student’s critical thinking skills (Coleman, Rogers, & King, 2002). Thyer (2004), a strong advocate for evidence-based practice, believes even a highly structured portfolio process can be “compatible with contemporary perspectives pertaining to ‘many forms of knowing’ and of ‘different learning styles,’ encouraging the student to creatively submit many different exhibits” (p.123). These authors suggest that portfolios have the potential to be used to evaluate student work and prove the requirements of a course have been met. While stating that portfolios encourage students to take ownership of their learning, they conversely state that portfolios highlight the “progress that the student has made within a program...and second have potential to capture the competence level of students at a particular point of time” (Coleman et al., 2002, p.586). It may be confusing to both the student and the teacher if portfolios are conceived as both formative learning processes and summative statements of competence (Elliot, 2003; Taylor et al., 1999).

If portfolios are used as evidence of a student’s learning, then it necessarily leads to the question of whether it is truly learner centered and learner driven or yet another means by which students must ‘prove’ they have ‘got it’ – that is, the material that the expert teacher deems to be important to effective social work practice. Alvarez and Moxley (2004) establish properties or rules they believe must guide all portfolios. These ascribed properties include: evidence, support for the evidence with a variety of sources, linkage of evidence to educational or professional competencies, the ability to explain the significance of the evidence to the field, and the making of a case for how their work is

distinctive. It is apparent in this conceptualization of portfolios that social work education and practice be evidentiary-based toward competency outcomes.

Believing the purpose of portfolio to be one of self-knowledge and creativity, a second view, which is non-positivist, subscribes to portfolios from within an interpretive paradigm. This view argues for the need to conceptualize portfolio as a creative and dynamic process where the student is the expert on her/his own knowledge and experience in relation to the subject matter and the instructor and others guide the process along the path. In this perspective, portfolio is most useful in a seminar type of format (Jones, 1994). "The potential of groups to provide a safe space or 'cultural island' for their members has long been utilized in guidance and counseling practice" (Graham & Megarry, 2005, p.774). The student's experiences, values, beliefs, and attitudes, become important, valid, and meaningful in the portfolio process (Bernotavicz, 1994).

2.7.2 Context of Portfolios in the Research

The current research envisions portfolio as a self-reflexive process, emphasizing the importance of the journey (formative) rather than the destination (summative). Like other definitions, portfolios contain artifacts and are self-directed by the student.

Consistent with feminist liberatory pedagogy, is the perception of social work as art.

Social work characterized as art rather than science is a theme which has been lost in many recent discussions of social work, yet art has the virtue of being able to accommodate notions of ambiguity and uncertainty in ways which pose major problems for rational-technical approaches.
(Goldstein as cited in Parton, 2003, p.2)

Social work is a creative, dynamic and relational endeavour that needs to emphasize critical consciousness, the use of self-in-relation to the client system and that the personal and professional self cannot be conceived of as discrete subcomponents to social work

practice (Valentich, 1986; Solomon, 1981). Portfolio product is the destination as a representation of this self-reflexivity, toward the development of a critical consciousness in application of a model of praxis. Social work knowledge is developed and implemented through the conscious use of self.

The portfolio process is intensely personal and student-driven and directed. The artifact(s) of the process may contain writing or other modes of expression, but all honor how the student comes to know, and may include painting, sculpting, carpentry, poetry, quilting, song, dance, interviews with others, journals, autobiographies, multi-media displays, and presentations. This honors ways of coming to know beyond the strictly classical empiricist educational paradigm. Reed and Newman (1997), in writing about interpersonal practice beyond diversity and toward social justice, state: "remember that there are many ways of knowing - of understanding one's world, of learning and changing. The practitioner who recognizes this develops a repertoire that uses many approaches to practice" (p.72). Further, they specifically cite the importance of the arts and state that we "often discover practice principles that broaden our options for everyone, not just the groups who developed them" (ibid). The student is encouraged to empower her/him self by setting both the course and the outcome of the journey, guided in relationship with the course instructor.

A feminist liberatory pedagogy is utilized to assist students in their portfolio journey. It is in this framework the value of personal self in social work practice, self-in-relation, and the value of the connectivity of all things is evident and congruent to the utilization of the self-reflexive portfolio in social work education. The feminist liberatory classroom promotes conditions necessary to self-reflexivity that include "the creation of a

safe and supportive environment, one that fosters trust as well as growth” (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005, p.304). The self-reflexive portfolio as a pedagogical tool can begin the melding of social work education and practice, serving the needs of educators to educate and students to be prepared personally for professional social work practice.

In the expansion of portfolios beyond a summative evaluation product and into a formative self-reflexive process, social work educators can begin to bridge the rift between social work education and practice. “The survival of social work as a distinct professional discipline will depend on its ability to reconcile the apparent contradictions between the discourses of competence and creativity, in particular in the context of social work education” (Lymbery, 2003, p.100). It is time to begin creative exploration from a position that encourages dialogue rather than enforcing silence and disenfranchisement of either paradigm. It is not about absolutes but rather working across and between differences to achieve greater understanding and depth as educators, students, practitioners, and as a profession.

Operating from the assumption social work is not just technique and skill but is about humanness and value, it is important to search out ways to embrace a model that provides space for social work students to engage in critical consciousness, transformative learning, and self-reflexivity. It is the aim of the current research to begin articulation of how students’ experiences of pedagogical tools such as the portfolio that are purposefully constructed to value and engage in the subjective, can inform professional social work practice. There is potential for tools such as the portfolio to be an integral component of holistic education models based upon critical consciousness and embracing of multidimensional ways in which individuals come to know.

Acknowledging and celebrating the person in the professional speaks to both the historical roots and current tensions of the social work profession.

2.8 Chapter Summary

Historically, social work practitioners have experienced disconnect between what they learn in the educational environment and what they practice in the communities they serve. This disconnect echoes the tension between the social control function of the Charity Organization Societies and the social reform, empowerment perspective of the Settlement House Movement. As social work education developed in the positivist academy, the voice for empowerment and social change became marginalized, furthering the gap between education and practice. The predominance of the 'male' voice in the academy needs to balance with the 'female' voice of practice (Davis, 1985). A critical perspective infused in feminist liberatory pedagogical practices using tools such as the portfolio has the potential to begin the realignment of social work education and practice. The voice of students needs to be at the forefront of educational discourse. Singularly relying on educator discourse so prevalent in the literature and standards of accreditation is to forget the reason for teaching in the first place – to work alongside students in the development/enrichment of beginning social work practice models that embrace the values of the profession.

The current research adds a dimension of the female voice by placing it alongside the male voice in the academy. Social work education and research needs to reflect the multidimensional perspectives of human understanding that evolve out of exploration of both exploratory and explanatory types of knowledge development. Asking students what they know, how they came to know it, and how this subjective knowledge informs their

social work practice will increase understanding of how learning in education can inform and be informed by social work practice. This can mobilize social work educators and researchers to look toward the population they serve to ensure their work is meaningful and relevant in social work practice settings.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The epistemological position of the research is firmly situated in an interpretivist perspective; subjectivity is valued, and lived experience, emotionality, and spirituality are viewed as equally important to the positivist notion of detachment and objectivity. It is premised upon the belief that social work education is unbalanced regarding the objective quantitative science and subjective qualitative views. The research explores the application of portfolio as a pedagogical tool in the advancement of a critical perspective to social work education and practice. The focus of the research is on undergraduate student experiences of self-reflexive portfolios and how they believe it informs their social work practice. The research proposition is that students who construct portfolios will engender the qualitative subjective view prevalent in social work practice.

3.2 Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

The purpose of the research is to explore student experiences with self-reflexive portfolios. It is the aim of the research to provide understanding of the experiences and how portfolio courses have influenced their social work practice. It is not an evaluation of portfolio but rather exploration of how self-reflexive portfolios can assist students in engendering the subjective in social work practice.

Qualitative methodology consisting of in-depth interviews and employing grounded theory is congruent to the particular culture of the portfolio process under exploration. Qualitative inquiry “focus[es] on how purposeful actors participate in,

construct, deeply experience, or imagine their lives” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p.12). This type of inquiry emphasizes processes and meanings, “the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.4). There are several reasons guiding the decision to employ a qualitative paradigm. First, there is limited literature available about formative portfolios using an interpretive perspective and for this reason; there is need for basic research before going further. Second, there is a need to bring student experience and voice into research about education and practice to hear from the population social work education serves. Finally, qualitative methods are the best way to access the transformative philosophy of the portfolio courses that ask students to determine their own learning journey, to engage in a process of critical consciousness, creating meaning for them “in their own terms” (Patton, 1990, p.22).

This research inquiry is largely inductive, aimed at theory building rather than theory verification.²⁷ “The strategy of inductive designs is to allow the important dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be” (Patton, 1990, p.44). The focus upon students’ experiences and perceptions supports inductive inquiry (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

3.3 Research Landscape

As a part of the articulation of the research, it is important to situate myself in the

²⁷ In qualitative methods, exploratory questions, such as in the current research, are put forward as propositions, designed to elicit how people assign meaning to their experiences rather than the formal hypothesis of the quantitative tradition. The result is a series of propositions and possibilities for the generation of tentative theoretical constructs, a beginning, rather than endpoint of explanation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

larger context of the study. Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) state that “stating where you are” is important as “initiating successful...studies requires... intellectual curiosity about a topic and access to settings and people from which one may collect appropriate data” (p.9). I am a white female situated in the academy of a western Canadian university for eight years, teaching undergraduate social work to students located in a Northern Canadian context.^{28, 29} It is within this context that my intellectual curiosity about portfolios first became aroused. It has been a challenge to shift my own ideas of knowledge creation and dissemination as I work with peoples living in the North, which have included students from every territory and province in Canada. The students are largely female, transplanted here as their male counterparts seek high paying employment opportunities. A segment of the student population is Aboriginal, primarily Cree and Métis, impacted by a history of colonization, residential school experiences, and economic destitution. The detached expert academic, the ‘ivory tower’ approach to education has never done well in this cultural context where there is a history of silencing of ‘other’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Numerous First Nations reserves and Métis settlements are located in the region. Adaptation of standardized curriculum is a requirement for meeting the needs of the population. The inclusion of self-reflexive portfolios to the course of studies has been a journey of expanding both what I teach and how I teach it. As Pennell and Ristock (1999) note, it is important to “nudge social workers and others to expand the range of possibilities for professional education by

²⁸ For details of this BSW program, see Zapf, Pelech, Bastien, Bodor, Carriere, & Zuk. (2003). Promoting anti-oppressive social work education: The university of Calgary’s access learning circle model. In W. Shera. (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives on anti-oppressive practice*. (pp. 447-465). Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press.

²⁹ Residents in this geographical area self-define as Northern Canadians as we are five hours north from the nearest major urban centre to which we are dependent upon for many of our community’s services.

challenging the assumptions of the discipline about the nature of the ‘subject’, both the subject of social work and the subject who does the social work” (p.464). My philosophies of teaching and pedagogical tools as an educator have been nudged in assisting students in the development of a professional identity.

I occupy what Davis (1985) refers to as the ‘female voice’, valuing connectivity, relationship, and an ethic of care in my work with the community I serve. I believe community members have an expectation of participation, availability, and investment in people and their lived realities and I have a self-expectation of engaging in a process of critical consciousness, reflexivity, and praxis. I bring this lens to the research.

3.4 Research Design

Consistent with qualitative inquiry, data was collected using the long-interview format. As McCracken (1988) states:

The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world. The long interview [allows] us...to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do. (p.9)

The focus of the interview was on conceptualizing the student’s experience with the portfolio and how she/he perceives it influences her/his social work practice from within her/his own subjective understanding of both the experience and the influences. The often intensely personal nature of the portfolio journey makes the individual long interview the most suitable method to collect participants’ understandings of their experiences.

Prior to further elucidation on the specifics of the research design, it is important to note both the disadvantages and advantages to the design chosen to explore portfolios in social work education. Table 3.1 provides an overview of these.

Table 3.1 Critical Evaluation of Research Design

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <p><i>Advantages</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses a gap in the literature. • Can explore process and not just product or learning outcome. • Consistency/congruency with what I teach, how I teach it and therefore how I research portfolio. • Brings the voice of student population forward. • Audit checks will illuminate findings further. • Produces rich, thick descriptions (Marlow, 2005). • Can clarify questions with the participants. • Uniqueness as well as extrapolation of similarities in experiences and perceptions. • Researcher bias less likely to overshadow the research as work closely with participants throughout. • Researcher ‘bias’ minimized by the checks in place as well as using grounded theory and verbatim accounts of participant experiences. • Researcher knowledge of subject matter enhances the likelihood of understanding of the topic. • High response rate (Marlow, 2005). • Researcher – participant relationship enhances trust and rapport in the interview process. |
| <p><i>Disadvantages</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of ‘female’ voice may not be perceived as legitimate by the academy. • Retrospective account rather than as the learning occurs. • Anonymity not protected and therefore may act as a barrier to participation. • May only get ‘favorable’ responses. • Expensive and time consuming. • More likely to get socially desirable responses (Neuman, 2004). |

3.4.1 Recruitment Procedures

A purposeful sampling strategy was utilized to recruit BSW graduates. "The primary purpose of sampling is to collect specific cases...that can clarify and deepen understanding" (Neuman, 2004, p.137). The small nature of the social work community in the Northern context in which the study is situated made snowball sampling the most feasible recruitment strategy. Snowball sampling is the process where some potential participants are informed of the study, and they in turn inform others (Marlow, 2001). Word of mouth and an email list-serve for Northern practitioners were the primary methods to recruit potential study participants. This continued until nine participants contacted me by telephone agreeing to engage in the research process. More than twenty graduates contacted the researcher within a two-week period following the initial call out to participate. Participants were selected on a first contact basis, and needed, for practical reasons, to be within a six-hour drive of the research study location. Once nine participants were confirmed, the other potential participants were contacted and thanked for their interest in this study. Two of the participants were from a rural town two hours away, one from an urban centre five hours away, another two hours away in a neighbouring province, and the remaining five from within a smaller radius to the research study location. Participants were provided with a Letter to Participate via email (Appendix A) and a copy of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). "Researchers are more likely to get good data, and know what data they are getting, if the interviewees are told at the outset what the research topic is, even if initially in relatively broad terms, and why the topic is of interest" (Walker, 1985, p.48). The purpose and focus of the research, as well as the time commitment involved and informed consent procedures were

reviewed with the potential participant prior to arranging a convenient time to meet.

Participants were also informed of the commitment to both the interview process as well as the subsequent sharing circle.

3.4.2 The Participants

Nine BSW graduates from the BSW program in which I teach portfolio courses were purposefully recruited to participate in the study. Qualitative studies using an interview format generate significant amounts of data from small numbers of participants (Patton, 1990). As Patton (1990) notes, there is always a 'breadth versus depth' trade-off when making decisions in qualitative studies. As representativeness rather than generalizability is the aim of qualitative inquiry, the depth of information provided offset the smaller number of participants interviewed (Rudestam & Newton, 2001).

There were no controls in place for gender, age, culture, ability, grade point average, or other demographic data. To control for demographics may falsely lead to interpretation of a single voice being 'the' voice of all representatives from that particular population. A person's demographic profile does not make the experience more or less relevant or important to understand. Each person's unique contextualized experiences are as meaningful as the next when the focus is on the co-creation of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, the demographic information presented here is for descriptive purposes only. Table 3.2 provides basic demographic information about the participants in the study. Four of the nine participants self-identified as Aboriginal³⁰ and only one participant was male. The high Aboriginal representation is contextual as there is a high

³⁰ For the purposes of this study, the term Aboriginal is used to denote both status (Treaty) and non-status where this delineation is a Western government concept as opposed to an individual defining identity or culture. Each participant was asked which term they were most comfortable using. All four participants indicated 'Aboriginal' as opposed to Indigenous or First Nations.

Table 3.2 Demographic Characteristics

| Name* | Age | Position held | Years in practice since BSW completion | Educational background prior to entering BSW program |
|-------------------|------------|---|---|---|
| <i>Courtney**</i> | 44 | Researcher/past child protection supervisor | 6 | Social work diploma, University arts and science courses. |
| Sally | 51 | Women's counselor | 4 | Associate's degree in arts, child and youth diploma. |
| <i>Stan</i> | 43 | Aboriginal Specialist | 5 | Social work diploma, University arts and science courses. |
| <i>Ruby</i> | 25 | Clinical social worker | 2 | University arts and science courses. |
| Marsha | 38 | Addictions /Mental Health counsellor | 2 | University arts and science courses. |
| Mary | 54 | Hospital social worker | 3 | Licensed Nurse, University arts and science courses. |
| Jane | 33 | Supervisor, Child Protection | 2 | Bachelor of Arts degree. |
| <i>Eva</i> | 41 | First Nations Regional Child Protection | 1 | Social work diploma, University arts and science courses. |
| Michelle | 30 | Child protection worker | 2 | Bachelor of Arts degree |

*names are fictitious to protect identity of participant.

**italics denotes self-identified as Aboriginal (Cree or Metis).

population of Aboriginal people in the Northern part of the province where the study occurred. The lone male representative is also typical in the BSW program location where high paying industry jobs often appeal more to men than post-secondary education. In the eight years of the program at this location, there have been six male students, three of whom currently practice social work. The current ages of participants were between twenty-five and fifty-three years old. A variety of social work positions were represented in the participant sample.

3.4.3 Interviews and Research Questions

Individual interviews were arranged with each of the participants. Each interview was approximately one to two hours in length. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Given the geographical diversity of participants, extensive travel was required for the interviews. Interview settings were either in the participants' homes or at their workplace. One interview occurred in the researcher's office. Prior to commencing with the formal interview, participants were again reminded of their rights, the consent form was reviewed and signed, and the digital voice recorder was placed in a location that was visible to both the participant and the researcher. The demographic information (Appendix C) was collected at the end of the interview process, as the structured form-like nature of the questions would not fit within the open, conversational process of the interview. Asking the demographic information at the end of the interview was also a way of closing off the formal research process.

This exploratory study asked open-ended questions to allow BSW graduates employed in social work practice to articulate in their own words their experiences of engaging in self-reflexive portfolios and how they believe it has influenced their social

work practice. Questions for the research ensured attention to the purpose and aims of this study, which is to increase understanding into how pedagogical tools such as the self-reflexive portfolio courses address the rift between social work education and practice. Based upon the rift between social work education and practice, the expressed need to engender the subjective in education, and the lack of social work practitioner voice in the discourse, the following research questions guided the development of the interview guide:

- 1. How do social work practitioners who are BSW graduates of the University of Calgary's Learning Circles Program describe their experience with self-reflexive portfolios?*
- 2. How do they create meaning from the different portfolios?*
- 3. What has been their most significant learning gained from engaging in portfolio courses?*
- 4. How do they think their experiences with portfolio courses have informed their social work practice?*
- 5. What would social work practitioners who are BSW graduates of the University of Calgary's Learning Circles Program like to share with educators about teaching tools such as portfolios?*
- 6. What can educators learn about engendering the subjective in teaching social work?*

The research inquiry began by asking two former students still in contact with me to be part of a research committee that would provide assistance in the development of appropriate interview questions most likely to elicit the richness of portfolio experiences

and how it influences social work practice. This served to put into check any of my own potential bias as an outsider to a process that I have observed but never experienced. Qualitative research is emic, honoring the participants, or insiders view of their experience (Patton, 2002). These individuals are considered experts in the phenomenon under exploration and therefore offer a different perspective from my own, providing valuable insight into the types of questions that may be useful in gaining understanding of experiences and perspectives of participants.

The interview guide (Appendix D) established by the research committee provided some structure to each interview specifying different topic areas, while still being open enough to allow the participants to provide the detail of their experiences and perceptions from within their own framework (Patton, 1990). The flexibility of the guide allows the researcher to use the constructs of the participant and speak to her/him using their language, thereby keeping information in context and increasing the likelihood the results reflect the reality of what I am studying (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). All questions in the interview guide were open-ended, “establish[ing] the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants. It does not presume an answer” (Seidman, 1991, p.62). The interview guide approach also allows modifications in both the wording and order of questions, to instill a more conversational flow to the interview process.

All interviews began with an open-ended question about experiences of engaging in the portfolios. From this similar beginning, the interviews built upon information shared while still ensuring the general areas of interest to the study were covered. This flexible yet semi-structured format allowed participants to create their own reflective

processes during the interview. It also ensured cultural congruence with Aboriginal participants, who often relate learning through oral storytelling rather than discretely identifying factors or skills that arose out of the portfolio experience. For example, one Aboriginal participant, related through symbolic metaphor, the sum story of his experiences with portfolio:

That time when I was almost finished, I was so emotional. And I remember my last portfolio, I wrote it, based it on some stories that I was told about. I remember a story that my dad told me when I was younger about when eagles are ready to leave the nest, little eaglettes, their mother eagle will put the sheep skin in the nest where the nest is all full of thorns, when they're small they're real comfortable in there. Then when it's time for them to take flight and time for them to live their own life, eventually you know, mother eagle will take that sheep skin out and all of a sudden you know those little eaglettes foos are not comfortable anymore cause they're stepping on these thorns right. All of a sudden they got to get off, get up and leave the nest. I remember that portfolio that I wrote on that methods, I wrote on there towards the end, that I thank you for being that mother eagle. And even though as hard as it is to leave the nest, I know I have to. But I'll always remember where I've come from, what it took to get me here, and I'll always be thankful.

Following the completion of the interview, participants were invited to give feedback to the process and to suggest any additions or clarify questions or statements they made.

Given the travel involved and availability of time, the nine interviews took approximately four weeks to complete.

3.5 Data Analysis

Once interview transcriptions were completed, each interview was again listened to and read simultaneously to begin a process of 'hearing' the emergent story of each participant as well as to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Data was analyzed using a modified version of the constant comparative method (CCM) of data analysis in

grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).³¹ I have employed CCM in past research projects and found it useful in representing both a static theme as well as the more fluid process of experience. This method is for generating a tentative theory that is “integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data, in a form clear enough to be readily, if only partially, operationalized” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.35). The analysis consisted of both inductive and deductive processes. Inductive as the resultant themes, categories, and stages of experiences and perceptions arise directly from the data obtained in the interviews, deductive as my own conceptual framework influences both the posing of questions and the perception of data. This interactional and iterative process is consistent with that advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998), Crabtree and Miller (1992), and Marshall and Rossman (1999). Grounded theory researchers are interested in patterns of action and interaction and in descriptive and conceptual writing that always contains elements of theories that can be traceable to the data that gives rise to them (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

The application of the CCM involved the coding of each transcript. A code is defined as “an abbreviation or symbol applied to a segment or words – most often a sentence or paragraph of transcribed field notes in order to classify the words” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56). A code represents the participants’ words at a slightly more abstract level. Once the transcripts were open-coded, axial codes were developed. Axial codes draw a relationship between several open codes, building a ‘story’ connecting the different emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each level of abstraction is

³¹ Recognizing grounded theory evolved into two different interpretations, referred to as ‘Straussian’ and ‘Glaserian’. The tenets developed by Glaser are more closely situated to the modifications suggested here (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

directly traceable back to the raw data, the participant transcript. As this process unfolds, a model emerges in which a tentative basic social process (BSP) is put forward as representative of the story. A BSP is specified as types, dimensions, properties, and categories by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This procedure was modified such that elements, themes, and stages were used to represent the different levels of abstraction and interaction beyond the open coding of the transcript. I believe this language is more reflective of a story format, less prescriptive in its processes, and more accessible to the participants. This modification also allowed for the building of a visual metaphor put forward by participants at the sharing circle.

Memos were utilized extensively throughout the data analysis phase of the research. Glaser (1978) defines a memo as “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding. Memos lead, naturally to abstraction or ideation” (p.83). The memo and coding process encouraged the interplay of inductive and deductive levels of analysis while still staying grounded in the actual data. Theoretical saturation is another important construct in grounded theory. Strauss (1987) argues for the need to continually revise and modify codes, themes, and processes until theoretical saturation is reached. This occurs when “additional analysis no longer contributes to discovering anything new about a category” (Strauss, 1987, p.21). While theoretical saturation was not to be achieved in all themes prevalent in the emergent story given the small sample and time constraints for study completion, some saturation did occur, specifically in terms of how the portfolio lead to ‘transformation’. However, it is the intent of the study to represent a beginning exploration rich in descriptive context, not an end point of explanation. In the modification proposed here the CCM provided a

structured framework for data analysis while still allowing for some flexibility. This ensured the 'data' or stories of participants and the extrapolated themes/processes from the stories are accurate representations of the participants' experiences of self-reflexive portfolios and how they perceive this subjective knowledge informs their social work practice.

3.6 The Sharing Circle

The sharing circle was a method chosen for data expansion and verification. It is consistent not only with a critical feminist approach to research and teaching, but also ensures cultural congruence to the student population served by the BSW program in its Northern location. Sharing circles, where the instructor and student sit in a circle, are held regularly throughout the BSW program as a mechanism for processing and reflecting upon different experience. Further, it provides the researcher with the opportunity to share how meaningful and significant each person is in sharing experiences of portfolio and furthering understanding of the use of subjective knowledge in social work practice.

3.6.1 Background and Context

Through analysis of individual interviews, the preliminary results in the form of a model for understanding were returned to participants by way of a sharing circle. I first began employing the sharing circle as a way of listening to the students I work with in the BSW program. It was apparent to me early on as an educator in the North that I was missing an essential piece of the experiences of many of my students. It seemed the vocal students in class were those of European white ancestry, familiar and comfortable in a classical model of education and strong in academic writing. Yet I also recognized the silencing of 'other', that I was somehow participating in a culture where the Indigenous

voice became lost in the babble of the dominant. I knew from my private meetings with these students they had a strong voice, much wisdom, and insight to share. Consistent with my pedagogical model, I turned to them for assistance in listening and bringing voice forward equally into the classroom. Two Aboriginal students taught me the circle. One is a Cree woman whose father is a recognized Elder in her home community and mother a strong activist for the rights of Indigenous women, the other a Cree man who practices his culture through the teachings of his grandfathers and father, who were ceremonial drummers. The circle denotes the connectivity of all things, the cycle of life, and the equality of all members. There is no leader, only a circle keeper. The circle keeper (in this instance the researcher) is a fully participating member of the circle except to gently remind members of the sacred rules of the circle if necessary. The keeper calls the circle together.

The essential characteristics of the sharing circle, as orally transmitted to me, include the creation of a safe environment for people to share their subjective wisdom. A sacred object (such as eagle feather, stone, or talking stick) is then passed from one person to the next as they speak, in the order of the rising sun (from left to right). There is no interruption when a person is speaking (so long as they hold the sacred object there is permission to speak freely), the circle continues to proceed around and around (typically at least three times) until all members have completed their sharing. Circle members may pass on any given turn, there is no comforting of individuals displaying emotion, and instead emotion and speech are honored and left in the circle. The content of the circle is not processed further or referred to again upon its completion unless used to make a decision, in which case it is simply referred to as 'the circle' rather than crediting a single

individual with a decision or idea. The circle has taught me to appreciate silence, to allow people to be who they are, to be patient, to truly listen (with my heart and my head) to what students are teaching me, and to honor all people for their differences and uniqueness.³² Within the circle, an eagle feather presented to me by an Elder was used as the sacred object in keeping with the model that emerged through the data analysis process.

3.6.2 The Circle Meeting

The circle was used to present the story (i.e. the collective stories encapsulated by the thematic model) back to the participants, to ensure accuracy of elements, themes, and stages extrapolated from their individual stories. The story was placed in a diagram in the center of the circle as a reflective starting point to the process. It was used as a way to ensure that in presentation of the larger voice, the individual voice had not been left out of the telling. As researchers, we have “obligations to tell their stories to them and to others – to give them voice...we owe it to tell them verbally or in print what we have learned” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.280). It is important to be congruent with the process of the participants’ educational journey when they were in relationship with me as an instructor, and consistent with my own pedagogical principles. The sacredness of the circle prohibits audio or videotaping, but with their permission, general field notes were recorded following the sharing circle meeting without reference to individuals. This ensured I was reflecting their feedback on the story I presented to them. In research terms, returning the story to the participants is a form of analytic triangulation; ensuring

³² For writings on talking circles see Michael Hart (2002), *Seeking Mino-pimatisiwin: an aboriginal approach to helping*; Christine Baldwin (1998) *Calling the circle, the first and future culture*; and Jean Greenwood (2005), *The circle process: A path for restorative justice*.

extrapolations remain true to the specifics of the experiences of the participants (Patton, 1990). Analytic triangulation serves as a form of 'member check' which Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider the most important in establishing the credibility of the research.

As keeper of the circle, I called the meeting of research participants approximately two months following the original interviews and upon completion of preliminary data analysis. The circle was held in the classroom where participants had attended their social work classes. I believe this environment was a comfortable and familiar one to them as well as encouraging the recall of their experiences with portfolio. Seven of the nine participants were able to attend the circle at the given time. The model, representing the extrapolated stories of the collective on large poster board, was placed in the center of our circle, and I began by holding the feather and talking about the process and the themes I had heard through their sharing. I shared with participants the importance that I, as the story carrier, needed permission to share this wisdom. It is my responsibility to be accurate and truthful to what they shared³³.

The circle continued with the feather passed to the left. Each participant shared their thoughts and gave feedback. The feather was placed in the center of the circle, and I sat near the model with a felt pen, inviting all members to continue to develop any modifications to the model. The circle stressed the importance of different themes and added a portion to the model, which was later shared with the two participants not able to attend the sharing circle for further validation and confirmation. The model is discussed in detail in the data analysis chapter. Following this process, we went back into a formal sharing circle where I began with the feather and each person, as they too received the

³³ Acting as a conduit for the story of participants is yet another way of addressing the researcher-participant power differential, consistent with feminist pedagogy.

feather, reflected on the process as well as on what was co-created in the center of the circle. Participants shared how powerful the process was, how honored they were to be a part of it, and how the model was an accurate reflection of who they are and what they do in their social work practice. We then ended the circle and shared in food and beverages, which is an important cultural tradition in the North.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research attended to ethical considerations throughout the process of the study design, data collection, data analysis, and writing of results. In addition to the protection of the rights of participants and the careful consideration given to the researcher-participant relationship, thought was also given to the ethical responsibility of the researcher accurately representing the story constructed through the interview process and sharing circle as well as honoring the individual participants by presenting each with a completed copy of the dissertation. This form of 'giving back' when we have been given something is culturally congruent with both the Aboriginal culture represented in the model as well as the cultural norms historically present in the social work profession.

3.7.1 Protecting the Rights of Participants

The standard written informed consent form, as specified by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women in *Feminist Research Ethics: A Process* (2004) and the *Tricouncil Policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (2003) was strictly adhered to throughout the research process. These guidelines, which included written and verbal review of confidentiality, storage of sensitive information, right to withdraw at any time from the study, the stripping of any identifying information from the raw data, and right to obtain a copy of the results, were reviewed

with the participant prior to the commencement of the interview. A copy of this form was given to the participant, the original kept on file in a secured cabinet with the transcript as per specified procedures. The Ethical Approval Certificate, received from Memorial University of Newfoundland prior to commencement of the research was also shared with participants in recognition of protocol guiding the project. There were no known risks or benefits to participating in the interviews although anonymity among research participants was not possible due to participation in the second stage of data verification and expansion, the sharing circle. The circle members were however reminded of the sacredness of the circle and of keeping the content and names of members confidential. Only aggregate information of the larger story extrapolated from the transcripts was used in the circle; individual details were not included in the process.

3.7.2 Researcher-Participant Relationship

The relationship of the participant to the researcher was in the past educational journey, not in the present. This acted as a safeguard in protecting the right to not participate in the study without repercussions as articulated in the *Tri-council Policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (2003). The prior relationship allowed for the establishment of immediate rapport and safety in the interview process. The limitation to this position is that familiarity with the participant ran the risk of increasing researcher bias in the data collection process. Grounded theory however, considers relationship a strength rather than a limitation. "Theoretical sensitivity", according to grounded theorists,

consists of disciplinary or professional knowledge, as well as both research and personal experiences that the researcher brings to his or her inquiry...[W]e should add that in all modes of qualitative research the interplay between researcher and the actors studied – if the research is intensive – is likely to result in some degree

of reciprocal shaping....This is because researcher and data...speak to one another. (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 280)

A strong relationship between researcher and participant is also supported by Fetterman's (1989) contention that "working with people day in and day out, for long periods of time, is what gives...research its validity and vitality" (as cited in Creswell, 1998, p.201). The use of extensive field notes, a committee to establish the questions for data collection, and asking participants to provide feedback on the results of data analysis, all served as checks to decrease the risk of researcher bias unduly influencing the process or outcome of the research.

A final consideration in the previous relationship between the researcher and study participants was potential for only those who had a positive experience of the portfolio courses self-selecting to participate in the study. The research however, is not an evaluation of portfolio but rather has as its aim to build understanding of how portfolio experiences inform social work practice.

The ethical importance of ensuring there is no current power differential in relationship between researcher (instructor) and participant (student) entailed that data collection occurred retrospectively to the experience of portfolio. Although feminist research acknowledges power is always present in the complexity of a researcher relationship, integrity of both the researcher and the research signifies the importance of equalizing differences in power in research relationships as much as possible (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). While the limitation of this decision meant the actual experience had been reinterpreted over time by the lens of the participant, the strength is the potential for integration of learning into their current social work practice, enhancing the depth of information gathered. The trade-off of gaining understanding through retrospective

analysis, using a subset of a larger student population familiar to the researcher and located in a single setting, and protecting the rights of the participants, adds to the overall credibility³⁴ of the study.

3.8 Credibility of Research

Qualitative research needs to be judged from within its own set of tenets as to what consists of good research. While quantitative research communicates quality through validity and reliability, qualitative research uses different terms depending upon the epistemological position of the researcher undertaking the study.³⁵ The research does not claim to be representative of all students who experience the portfolio journey, any Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal group, nor to be generalizable to a larger student population or students who may have experienced portfolio in a different setting. It does need to be representative of the voices of the nine participants. Issues of credibility or 'trustworthiness' (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) however were attended to in:

- Use of a committee to assist in development of interview guide (dependability - Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Audiotaping and verbatim transcription of the interviews to ensure accuracy and representativeness of data (confirmability - Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Adhering to the constant comparative method of data analysis in which levels of abstraction are directly linked to systematic coding of transcripts (confirmability- Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

³⁴ Credibility is a term applied in qualitative studies to determine the soundness or rigour of the study's methods. It replaces quantitative notions of reliability and validity. Details addressing credibility of the research design are included later under the heading: 3.8 Credibility of Research.

³⁵ Creswell (1998) presents an excellent table summarizing the different conceptual categories utilized by a variety of qualitative researchers in addressing issues of validity and reliability in qualitative inquiry.

- Prior relationship with participants enhancing the researcher and participant relationship (prolonged engagement and persistent observation - Creswell, 1998).
- Soliciting feedback through a sharing circle (analytic triangulation - Patton, 2002; member checks - Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Detailed writing of the story using rich and thick descriptions supported by verbatim quotations from interview data as evidence of extrapolation to the larger elements, themes, and stages and notes, written impressions from the sharing circle (transferability - Lincoln & Guba, 1985; thick, rich descriptions - Creswell, 1998).
- Extensive field notes, documentation of coding procedures, diagrams, and theoretical representation and memos throughout the process (clarifying research bias - Creswell, 1998; auditability - Chiovitti & Piran, 2003).

Credibility is an ongoing, iterative process in qualitative inquiry and was attended to throughout the present research exploring how students' experiences of portfolios assist them in engendering subjective knowledge in their social work practice.

3.9 Chapter Summary

The conceptualization of the research on how students experience self-reflexive portfolios and how they perceive it informs their social work practice arose from within a feminist liberatory framework. This lends itself to an interpretivist paradigm, in which contextual realities are valued and explored, in the premise there is not unitary truth but rather meaning making experiences determined and defined by each participant (Lather, 1991). The research design supported this epistemological position from its inception through to the data analysis and data representation. There is potential for portfolios to be

utilized for formative knowledge building incorporating lived experience, emotionality, and the development of a critical consciousness. Critical consciousness encourages both the personal and professional in social work practice within a political perspective (Valentich, 1986; Solomon, 1981). Using interviews and a sharing circle expands understanding of portfolio in the social work literature and enhances understanding of how pedagogical tools can be utilized to create balance between objectivity and subjectivity in social work education and practice.

As social work education developed in the positivist academy, the voice for empowerment and social change became marginalized, furthering the gap between education and practice. The predominance of the 'male' voice in the academy needs to be balanced with the 'female' voice of practice (Davis, 1985). A critical perspective infused in feminist liberatory pedagogical practices using tools such as portfolio has the potential to begin the realignment of social work education and practice. The research design that applied an interview methodology, sharing circle, grounded theory in its data analysis and the voice of students throughout the research process is supportive of this position.

The voice of students needs to be brought to the forefront of educational discourse. Singularly relying on educator discourse so prevalent in the literature and standards of accreditation is to forget the reason for teaching in the first place – to work alongside our students in the development/enrichment of beginning social work practice models that embrace the values of the profession. Social work education and research needs to reflect the multidimensional perspectives on human understanding that evolve out of embracement of both exploratory and explanatory types of knowledge development. Asking students what they know, how they came to know it, and how this

subjective knowledge influences their social work practice increases our understanding of how learning in education can be engendered in social work practice.

Chapter Four

Data Presentation

4.1 Introduction

This chapter honors the story of each individual research participant, presenting a summary of themes shared during the interview process. It provides the foundation for the collective story that emerged through the analysis process. The nine participants interviewed openly shared their experiences and processes of completing portfolios in the BSW program. The interviews were a reflective process, requiring participants to look back and share their memories of the portfolio journey as well as how it informed their social work practice.

Two primary considerations guided data presentation. First, a decision was made to provide an overview of each participant's portfolio projects prior to presenting the themes from each interview. Describing the projects discrete from the interview summaries permitted a visual image of portfolio projects. Second, it was important to represent each participant in a manner honoring his or her speech patterns, sharing, and understandings.

The next section presents overarching themes of the interview, allowing the reader to begin to build a composite of both the similarities and differences among participants. It is not viable, given the length of the interviews (totaling almost three hundred pages) to present the transcripts in their entirety. As a compromise, salient segments of each person's interview are presented as exemplars of the themes identified. Transcript excerpts have been altered slightly to enhance ease of reading. For example common repetitive slang (i.e. like, you know, right) used in verbal conversation becomes

redundant and disconcerting in written form. These were therefore omitted where it was not deemed to alter the substance of the spoken message. Additionally, long pauses, which appear as [pause] in the original transcripts or 'uhm' indicating where a participant is collecting their thoughts, are also omitted in the presentation of excerpts in both this and the analysis chapter. Diligence was taken to ensure balance and congruence between the individual stories presented and the collective voice represented in the data analysis chapter that follows.

4.2 Portfolio Projects

The portfolio projects completed by the participants reflected the themes in the different courses. These included social work methods, diversity and oppression, research and communication, and generalist practice. Other, more conventionally designed and delivered courses were taken concurrent with the portfolio courses. The portfolio courses (spanning four semesters) were self-directed. Students determined in consultation with the instructor their learning expectations, learning processes, and learning representations. The students and instructor met in a seminar format several times a term. The seminar, comprised of eight to ten students, was conducted in a circle where each student is asked to share their journey and often receive input from others. The portfolio product was the demonstration of the learning over each four-month term. Participants chose a variety of mediums to express their learning.

Participants were not specifically asked by the interviewer to list their projects, but chose to describe projects as they spoke about their portfolio experiences. Therefore, while some shared each project completed as a way of grounding themselves in the experience, others may have only mentioned one. Table 4.1 presents a summary of each

Table 4.1 Portfolio Projects and Learnings

| Courtney | |
|-----------------|---|
| Project | Mobile of family that shifted with loss of sister and later mother |
| Learning | "Bringing this into practice, here I am doing investigations and we're moving a child from a family unit. How's that mobile shifted in that family? How can I keep this child closer to the family unit so the whole mobile won't be so shifted? How can we be creative in our work? How can we challenge policy to make the family preservation be in there somehow?" |
| Project | Audiotaped interview of father and mother in Cree about being Aboriginal. |
| Learning | "It was going through storytelling, I always find stories so powerful. I really noticed that especially with Aboriginal people, that's a big area of their life. All of a sudden this light bulb went on while I was in child welfare, oh my god, I'm one of them priests and nuns! That's what I thought of all of a sudden, this is just a different form of residential school, child welfare, which is why I chose to leave." |
| Sally | |
| Project | Tray with small hand cut intricate tiles in shape and color of the medicine wheel. |
| Learning | "I went to an Aboriginal way of knowing and thinking which I hadn't previously experienced in southern British Columbia. It was a new way of looking at the world, to learn something by looking at myself through the perspective of a different culture. There was just this constant awareness, I couldn't deny I wasn't very balanced. I had to learn to be internally competent in myself and you have to be able to trust your own thoughts and judgments." |
| Project | Written work reflecting on entire experience of completing the BSW program. |
| Learning | "I ended up going back to the very beginning and read everything, and it was interesting and one of the more important things were the doodles. Like the doodling that I did and I found that I had written things down, and I literally demonstrated my learning, the changes I felt I had made, the change of perspective in understanding. Maybe previously I may have had a desire as a helper to help people towards right action, when in truth, helping was a lot more about just listening and honoring people and giving them, believing in them and helping them feel like they could make decisions in their own lives." |
| Stan | |
| Project | Written works of life and cultural story |
| Learning | "I think at that time I was reclaiming who I was. I wanted to overcome that obstacle of writing. I thought to myself, all these years people wanted to hear me, read about me. At that time I finally allowed myself to write about me. When I started going down that personal journey of healing and wholeness, that it allowed me the ability to write my story. When I wrote it, I wrote it with a lot of compassion and I wrote it real heartfelt. I wrote it from my heart; I didn't write it from my mind. It helped me realize I was a success story." |
| Ruby | |
| Project | Footprints of life |
| Learning | "Finding value in how people have left those marks in my life helped me create myself, and help me validate myself. My realization is that I really had to look at how I could value myself rather than find validation and value from other people. Doing that portfolio helped me realize my own resilience, how important reflection is in practice, looking outside the box. Most of the things in my own life that I've gained strength from weren't from traditional sources, they're from non-traditional sources. The community can help." |
| Project | Medicine wheel model demonstrating different teachings |
| Learning | "It was so spiritual for me, and emotional. I can feel myself getting emotional thinking about it. It was such a growth. I felt so connected in a way I've never felt connected to people or to understandings and to theories, to beliefs, to values, to myself. Being comfortable with being who I am, and being comfortable in the way I will practice. It was really profound and just being able to honor my own self and all four of my dimensions." |

| Marsha | |
|-----------------|--|
| Project | Personal photos and writings collected from family members |
| Learning | "How do you figure out where you're at right now if you don't have an idea where you came from? Or what you've gone through? I was running full-tilt, like an escape mechanism. Taking the time to look back, all of a sudden the links between people and relationships and the enormity of some things." |
| Project | Acrylic painting on canvas |
| Learning | "I had to look inside; I had to question why I thought something about something. If I couldn't speak, how would I express it? I was by myself. I'd add layer upon layer because I'm a texture person, so for me that's really important because life's not flat. If a person was just doing textbook things, it would look flat. If I didn't have that introspection piece, I would have a flat picture." |
| Mary | |
| Project | Photos of roots and heritage on trip with Mother |
| Learning | "I took my mom with me, and we had kind of a clouded relationship, but taking her back it was like, wow this is such a neat place We all started somewhere, and that we're all connected. But the connectedness of all of us - maybe we're born in another country, or our ancestors were - but boy we're all interconnected and connected." |
| Project | Women in social work map of photos and time-line |
| Learning | "Just to see that growth and development over the course of the times. For me it was about women, because their voices were heard and it got more powerful as they came along, that social work had been mostly about women along the way and how they continued to do that." |
| Project | Hand-made comfort quilt with pockets and removable letter 'S' |
| Learning | "I made it for comfort, to wrap around me when I was struggling or unsure. To be okay with it. But in the pockets were things that affected me: alcohol, sexual abuse, incest, cancer. Then I had one pocket that was all about affirmations and coming to accept all of that other stuff. The 'S' was Survivor but it was removable. I think I have to honor my boundaries, I have to make sure that if I do get to a position where I'm not doing well, I need to be okay with that and to step back and say, look, this is too tough for me." |
| Jane | |
| Project | Body cast |
| Learning | "I wasn't able to see things clearly. I felt like I was suffocating. I think inside of me I felt like something was holding me back, something was holding me in, and doing the whole body cast it was like physiologically making me feel how I was feeling inside my head. When my husband cut the cast off, it was a sense of being released, part of me was set free. I think it's like I was oppressing myself right up until that point. I think that piece allowed me to see that I could allow myself to heal." |
| Project | Black and white photos of looking back |
| Learning | "It's like getting to the core of things, almost raw, because I was going back to my roots of learning and it was very significant. I think it helped me relate more on a day-to-day basis in terms of how I work with clients. The values, your personal experiences, the things that you process molds who you are as a person." |
| Project | Elaborate cake of celebration |
| Learning | "That's where I wanted to encompass all of my learning. This is where my learning is taking me. There were twenty-two pieces in the cake. I had all these little pieces all wrapped up and I had everything documented in terms of what each piece meant to me: spirituality, continuous learning, family, the rural north, optimism, a fence for having good personal and professional boundaries... Reflecting back on all of the pieces that I learned." |
| Michelle | |
| Project | Black and White Photos on powerpoint |
| Learning | "Family and pictures of different things of my culture and my history - a kind of reflection piece of where I come from and where I am now. Oppression around a way of life that |

| | |
|----------------|---|
| | changed for generations, people growing up in Newfoundland and moving away. Helps me look at people's resiliency factors, families that don't have their own natural support systems." |
| Project | Three framed photographs of lived context with oral presentation |
| Learning | "Living in the North and what it's like to live up here and how it's very different. It's a good different, there's a lot of similarities for me. Growing up there were fishermen, here there's farmers and people who work in the oil industry. I think to go into this profession you got to understand where you've come from, where you've been, and where you think you're going. A good solid foundation under yourself." |
| Eva | |
| Project | Paper-mâché globe with symbols glued to it and painted path of journey |
| Learning | "My development was changing and coming into a new space in my being, and talked a lot about my world. Who am I? Where do I fit in? What's my world like? And that's how I came up with this world idea. It was about my path, a spiritual path, my spiritual journey, how I came to be as a spiritual person. It was like telling a secret, it was a very emotional place. I remember thinking, people need to know this, this story about Aboriginal people or about Aboriginal women. It really opened up a whole other part of me." |
| Project | Paper cut-out of red and white person with black in-between |
| Learning | "The white represents the mainstream society. The red represents my Aboriginal self, and then the inside was the dark that I carry inside. The negative, the dark, the shame and all these different things, I was vulnerable, and felt raw. Now the doors are open, I know it is safe, I could talk about things differently. I felt all that darkness just kind of surface and just go away from me. I still carry a lot of shame, but I carry it differently. Once the story, once the secrets, and the shame and the ugliness is talked about, it fades away. I think about people, my clients and other people everywhere, who are you? How many parts of you are there? Do you have darkness; do you have to keep something?" |
| Project | Teaching of being a plant woman in Aboriginal culture |
| Learning | "I found my own voice. I found where I needed to be, and who I needed to be this way with, or if I could be myself in mainstream. If I could accept that. And then I could tell a story differently, with more pride. When I chose to present to the class, I had help from the spirit, the spirit world, to present who I am, a spiritual sacred thing. By now, I'd found my voice." |

participant's portfolios and the learning they acquired from the different projects. How this informs their social work practice is discussed in the analysis chapter.

4.3 Interview Summaries

The interview summaries present prevalent themes about the participant's portfolio experiences from the interview, followed by transcript excerpts providing the evidence of the construction of the different themes. Rather than choosing to use a minimum number of verbatim quotes which risks losing the individual voice and relying strictly on researcher interpretation, the reverse decision was made. The extrapolated theme is only stated, followed by a brief description; whereas the interviews become the substantive representation for the data presented.

There were three primary reasons informing this decision. First, this is consistent with both grounded theory's idea of staying close to the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Second, it is a good fit to a feminist epistemological lens for both research and pedagogy that continually informed the study. Third, the most powerful theme prevalent in both the individual interviews and the collective voice of the circle was the power of the story. This decision is therefore congruent to the perspective of the research participants. The story belongs to the participants - it is theirs to tell. The extrapolated model, containing multiple stories from the collective voice, evolves from this foundation. Stories inform, teach, heal, and bring connection. The second part of the research question, how these experiences inform social work practice, is woven throughout the data analysis chapter. As each individual story is presented, clear threads of commonality become prevalent, setting the stage for the model developed as a result of data analysis and presented in the

next chapter of the study. The following sections present each participant and the themes emerging from the individual's story.

4.3.1 Courtney

Courtney is a forty-four year old Aboriginal woman with six years post BSW experience, presently working as a researcher. She has also been employed as a child protection worker since the completion of her studies. Courtney placed value on how the portfolio courses honored her Aboriginal culture, assisted her in experiencing herself differently, and had positive influence on her social work practice.

4.3.1.1 Shifting Perspective to Challenge Self

Courtney spoke of how portfolios challenged her to incorporate her skills and experiences differently into her learning and social work practice, resulting in a shift of perspective that encourages critical thinking.

That teaching approach was different. It wasn't the mainstream type of learning that I was used to. Taking it out of that box of thinking, and coming up with a totally different type of perspective and putting it all together.

I really found that it's the way you perceive things. It's the experiences, it's the skills you gained or haven't gained, and it makes you think a different way. It makes you think in a very out-of-the-box type thinking. It really started me questioning okay, when I used to do this kind of work, this is what I used to do. But maybe I could try it this way? It challenges you to think very different.

The portfolio courses encouraged a different way of thinking and doing. This is important to Courtney, who came into the educational setting with previous experience in the field working at a women's shelter and child protection. She learned to perceive things differently and to draw connections between learning and experience.

4.3.1.2 Power of the Sharing Circle

Connected to thinking out-of-the-box was how the learning milieu of students

coming together to share stories and support one another was the sharing circle and the power it held for Courtney to present who she is in the world, her fears, doubts, and successes.

That's why it was so different, so impactful for me, because it was more, it was more safe. That's what I found, and it challenged me more on a different level. The sharing was becoming more open, and I started feeling a lot safer. The unity of everybody, supporting each other, we're becoming a family.

It's something that I never really had. For a long time, it was a really different feeling for me and I was actually allowing myself to feel that. For a long time I didn't let people really get to know me on such a deep level. I started feeling really connected to everybody and that sharing that was going on, where everybody was at, what was going on in their lives and it's still there. We kept in touch like through the years and it was that deep connection. I never had that in other programs that I've been in. Once you're done you go on your way and you're lucky if you see people again.

Support and connection from the sharing circle gave Courtney affirmation in her ability to practice social work. This affirmation from others led to confidence.

In a lot of ways, they really affirmed for me that for the longest time. I think the first semester of the BSW program I thought okay, oh my God, I'm going into a degree program and do I actually have the skill and the knowledge needed to be successful? Then sitting in seminar and listening to other people affirming for me that you do know what you're saying, you have skill, you do deserve to be sitting here with us and that my confidence just grew and grew and grew. I think it was the third semester, all of a sudden I felt for me yeah, I do deserve to be here, I do know what I'm doing. And the seminar, the contact, the sharing, helped me build that. All of sudden I was not getting it from outside people to say yeah you deserve to be here, you know what you're talking about I was saying it for myself and I was believing it. And that was a really powerful time.

With the support of other students and as her perspective shifted, Courtney developed a sense of self-worth and pride in undertaking her BSW degree. For this Aboriginal woman, the ability to be successful in education and in her chosen profession was profound given the many obstacles she, and other Aboriginal people, need to overcome to have a sense of belonging in Eurocentric educational institutions.

4.3.1.3 Learning Congruent to Culture

Courtney spoke at length in the interview to how the portfolio process supported her culture and therefore her way of being in the world. Rather than require her to strip herself of her cultural identity, to blend in with all the other students, the portfolio courses valued different dimensions of knowing.

It was that part that really made that connection for me...It was not the mainstream type of learning, it was more on a deeper level, because it was like the heart, soul and the knowledge that I had, and the experiences. And looking at symbols really means a lot to me as an Aboriginal person. Having that opportunity to express yourself and bring your knowledge to a different level, that was the opportunity that I needed. I never did that before, and I use that now with other people, and try to teach them different.

I guess to summarize it all, especially with adult learners and especially with me from my perspective being an Aboriginal woman and being Aboriginal, we express ourselves differently. We look at things differently, we have different experiences. It gave me that opportunity to express myself differently, and that's really important. Your needs are met, your learning needs, and that was the biggest success.

And especially the Aboriginal people, for me it was important like to feel a connection, to feel that affirmation that yes I can do it and it was something that I never thought or ever imagined that I'd do in my life. You can actually do different very powerful work with Aboriginal children and families. You can, it doesn't have to be black and white, you need to really make a connection with them in order for change to happen.

In addition to recognizing and valuing the need for relational connection, one outcome for Courtney in completing portfolio courses was knowledge that she can meet the needs of Aboriginal people and carry this forward into teaching others.

4.3.2 Sally

Sally is a fifty-one year old woman with a background in serving people with disabilities, working with children, and working with women who have experienced violence. Sally's experiences with portfolio courses assisted her in developing confidence

in her social work practice and critically examining her life experiences and their fit to effective social work practice.

4.3.2.1 Developing Confidence

Sally believed engaging in portfolio led her to have a sense of confidence in her practice and clarity in her convictions.

I think my first one actually ended up being one of the best ones for me, because of overcoming that obstacle of having to have confidence in showing something different about myself.

I think that I must of, well I obviously, I grew up in an educational system that only supported outside measures of judgment. It was really hard to take it away from that and to look at my own work and value my own work and have to demonstrate what I had learned.

I had to learn to be internally motivated, internally competent in myself, and not always look to others to tell me whether I was doing something right or not. I'm confident in what I know because I know I've put a lot of thought into it. I didn't just get there, it's not just some thought that I have, it's a thought that I have because I've really thought about it. It comes from learning about myself, combining all that knowledge through life experiences, that have taught me that I believe there are some things that I know and that's what I use.

4.3.2.2 Shifting Perspective

For Sally, there was a shift in perspective, understanding the difference between knowing what is right for a client and knowing how to honor them. This communicates a different understanding of the human condition. There is no expert and there is no right way, just different paths and journeys.

I think the main thing was the change of perspective, in terms of certainly understanding much more how I could influence people or not influence. My goal actually was to not influence people, while maybe previously I may have had a desire as a helper to help people towards right action. When in truth helping was a lot more about just listening and honoring people.

There's no them and us and maybe that's part of the medicine wheel, we're all together on that medicine wheel. We're all together in this, just in different places and different parts.

I think that once given the opportunity to think about something differently, or to demonstrate learning differently, to look at yourself differently, even just to do that, just to look at yourself, where I think previous educational experiences had not encouraged me at all to look at myself. Then once introduced to that whole perspective of doing that there was a lot of emotion, I cried a lot, there was this process that was going on.

I think that those portfolios initially give you permission to think for yourself, that it's just part of the process, it's not a condemning thing, not looking for the bad things in yourself, you're just looking to be aware of how your life experiences influences your practice so that you can take it into account.

4.3.2.3 Significance of Self-Reflection

Sally learned the skill of self-reflection through engaging with the portfolio process. She talks of how this gave her the ability to self-examine, to draw parallels between how she reacts and thinks today, to experiences she has had in the past. This reflective ability translates into her practice where she monitors how her personal self may be impinging upon her relationships with others. Self-reflection, from Sally's perspective, is also viewing learning as a journey rather than a destination.

I think the learning about yourself and reflection that is demanded by thinking about a portfolio project, or thinking about how you're going to demonstrate your learning, how you're going to show somebody who you are through whatever means that is. The process sort of starts slow, but it can kind of, I feel like it sort of took off and I started to examine many, many places in my life that maybe I would not have.

I know what I've learned, they have been my lessons and I've evaluated them, and I know I've learned parameters to evaluate things by that are my measuring sticks, my yard sticks that I've learned. Because I can do something and think how does that compare to what I've done in the past? Have I made a good enough effort? How do I feel about this? So I have my own process that I trust. If you're using self-reflection and self-knowledge as a means of dealing with a problem, you know if you have a problem with a person. It's about learning to be honest with yourself and just some things just are.

Whereas self-reflection teaches you that it's not finished, that it's a constant process, that it's a constant journey and that you always have to be examining what you're doing and re-evaluating and reflecting on what you're doing because

you're changing as you learn, as you grow older, as your experiences increase you're going to change.

4.3.2.4 Power of the Sharing Circle

The power of the sharing circle was also a prevalent theme for Sally. She speaks to the reciprocity between being both teacher and learner in the circle. From this, a strong sense of community develops.

Knowing through the portfolio that there's all sorts of different ways to reach people, especially seeing what my fellow students produced was sometimes just like oh my god, where's that person coming from? and it was very interesting. That was one of the parts of the portfolio - seeing how everybody else saw their learning, how they wanted to tell you and show you their experience, and that in itself kind of informs you that people really, really, really do look at the world differently and people really do interpret things differently. If you can try and help somebody find some other way of expressing themselves they may be totally freer than just speaking, or writing something down, or putting something in a journal.

Sally also shared the importance of taking risk, of being vulnerable, of showing incompetence rather than just competence. This sense of being real is a part of the sharing circle.

Trusting to a learning process, trusting to how important and kind of freeing self-reflection is and even though you can expose yourself you can survive it and know that you don't always have to be the competent one, we can all learn from each other. In the portfolio, you learned something when people presented and you went to see all their pieces, you learned something from everybody.

The portfolio is about that, it's about sharing who you are, how you learn, what you've learned in some way that is significant and special to you to the other people in your class. I mean sure it's to your instructor and that, but in truth it really is to the other people in the class. So it creates that community that you have.

The portfolio courses provided Sally with the opportunity to reflect upon her experiences and knowledge as well as develop a community of support with her peers through participation in the sharing circle.

4.3.3 Stan

Stan, a forty-three year old Aboriginal man with five years post BSW experience as Aboriginal specialist for the provincial government in his region, recalled the powerful emotion and healing processes the portfolio experience had created for him. He recounted how the portfolios helped him to reclaim both himself as well as his culture.

4.3.3.1 Healing through Reclaiming

Stan discussed how the portfolio courses allowed him to heal. Battling an addiction and childhood secrecy, the prospect of telling his story differently was daunting yet became achievable and rewarding.

It was sort of like my own author for my own story. And at the time I didn't really talk a whole lot about myself or my experiences. I was very introverted and I didn't really want to display a whole lot of my own personal feelings and my own personal experiences of those feelings. So at that time I was really struggling to just have the acceptance to proceed with writing from my own experiences and how I felt about those experiences.

I remember the first time sitting in the classroom, thinking to myself who wants to hear what I had to go through? or what I feel or what I've been through. I don't want anybody to know that because I was brought up with the idea of you don't talk, you don't trust, you don't feel. That's the way I was brought up; we weren't allowed to really discuss how you were feeling. You didn't express how you were feeling. A lot of the times the only thing I knew how to express back then was anger, because that's all I saw. I think the hardest thing that I remember was where do I start? What it did was it helped me to reclaim Stan for who Stan was. Starting from someone who couldn't even write hello on a piece of paper but could say it, and then all of a sudden from someone who didn't want to say it from my head, but said it from my heart was sort of like a real big milestone. To me it was almost like conquering my Mount Everest. I took that experience with me and I still carry it today.

The written word was a powerful medium for Stan. In it, he was no longer able to hide, but rather found the courage to become the author of his own story and reclaim his power and strength.

4.3.3.2 Power of the Sharing Circle

Through the stories of others and in validating his voice, the sharing circle provided Stan with the processes necessary for his healing journey. There was a sense of safety, respect, and trust present between the class members, providing an atmosphere where disclosure was acceptable and helpful in the learning journey. Prior to this Stan had not been in an educational setting where he was encouraged to share his ideas, beliefs, and way of being. The difference in this setting stood out as something remarkable to him as a platform for affirmation of his story.

I think the thing that scared me the most was people wanted to hear what I had to say. And I think to me I was sort of like holy...it was different. All of a sudden people want to hear what you've been through. People want to know the things that you have done, people want to know the successes that you have in your life, people want to hear those things.

Talking to my colleagues at the time about hearing some of their experiences and for them to speak openly. I think it only helped me more so to succeed in that way of allowing myself to write in those portfolios.

When they were telling their stories, their stories were really heartfelt, and realizing oh yeah, this is true life. I mean, these are people I don't know but yet they're willing to share these things that they've experienced.

Even though all of us who were in that classroom environment, we all came to the classroom with different challenges, different walks of life, different ways of doing things than everybody else, but we went there to be helpers of people that need the help.

It was okay for me to let loose in class, to breakdown when I needed to breakdown. It was okay for me when I finally allowed myself to write that thirty or forty page portfolio, to come to the classes to share my story. It's okay for me to do the job that I do now. It's okay for me for the way I do things in my life. It's okay because that's your life and that's your view on life.

4.3.3.3 Learning Congruent to Culture

As an Aboriginal person, significance was placed on the congruency between how the learning occurred and cultural practices. It encouraged the reclaiming of cultural

pride, that there is value in the Aboriginal way of communicating and being. The sharing circle is congruent to Aboriginal processes and assisted Stan in strengthening his cultural identity.

I think what I was doing was allowing myself to remember that, like I said earlier, my childhood wasn't picture perfect. I remember there was times that my dad was a hardcore Christian man and you didn't really talk a whole lot about traditional ways. But on occasion, he would. And I could see the transformation of this hardcore man that never really said a lot or had a lot of pride I guess, until he talked about some of those things that he had remembered when he was younger. Just hearing those stories, remembering some of the things that he said when he was younger, and the struggles that he went through and then, being an apprentice to my great-grandfather who was a very powerful medicine man at the time. Kind of observing him and helping him through those years. It was a matter of allowing myself to go back down that journey to find that personal pride. At the time, I was more and more soul searching within my own cultural identity. I was looking more towards the medicine wheel, allowing myself to do it or to follow that. To realize hey I can do this. I can be a teacher to cultural activities or cultural sharing. The portfolio that I based my social work practice on was traditional values. I really focused on medicine wheel practice because that's what helped me through the obstacles that I had to face day in and day out through school or through life.

For Stan, engaging in portfolio supported the incorporation of the medicine wheel as a social work practice model. In working with others, Stan is able to use the strength of both worlds – that of Eurocentric society and Aboriginal culture.

Medicine wheel is like a portfolio, now that I think about it. Because that's a picture of you - your own life, your own experiences. Whether it's good bad or maybe you're struggling with something today and realize that you look at it in a different way and sometimes you can find your own path of how best to overcome that obstacle.

I tried to take the best of both worlds. I look at things in an alternative way, but I always go back, refer to that medicine wheel and the stories that I always say when I was doing the teachings.

The reclaiming of culture and the healing supported in the portfolio courses allowed Stan to begin the process of giving back to his community.

4.3.4 Ruby

Ruby is a twenty-five year old Aboriginal woman practicing as a clinical social worker since the completion of her BSW degree two years prior to the interview. The portfolio experiences involved a process of healing from her past, coming to terms with her life experiences and circumstances, and recognition of the power of the sharing circle as a facilitating medium to undertake the transformation of self.

4.3.4.1 Healing and Validation

Ruby experienced her portfolio journey as healing and validating of her experiences. She was raised primarily in the foster care system in the far North and did not readily share these experiences with others.

To honor my own experience and say, hey, I'm okay with my past and my background and I've done a lot of work to try and move far, far away from that. I need to just honor the work that I have done and be okay with where I'm at. It made me see, okay these are some of the underlying issues for me, let's look at them, let's process them, let's try and reflect, let's make connections here, let's bring them forward so I understand how they might affect me in my practice. It helped me to learn where my limits were and where to set my boundaries, to re-establish boundaries.

I got to reflect, it was like doing personal work through portfolio. I think life should be all about becoming self-actualized, and I really don't think you become self-actualized by reading a textbook and by understanding every single theory that's out there about the world. I think becoming self-actualized is looking at your own stuff and reflecting and processing, internalizing, making connections and trying to seek balance somewhere and understanding how to put balance into your harmony. I think for a lot of social workers and why some of our burn-out rates are so high is because we forget about the balance, we forget about harmony that makes medicine.

For Ruby, accepting who she is in the moment is a significant step toward achieving harmony and balance.

4.3.4.2 Power of the Sharing Circle

The exchange of emotion through storytelling impacted Ruby's self-

understanding. It shifted her ideas of difference, allowed her to normalize her own history, and to value experience as something to be embraced rather than avoided.

The seminars, it was so based on processing. And processing not necessarily your own pain, but your own experience and making connections to what's going on for you right now in your life to something in the past. Making those significant connections so you can have an understanding. I mean for some people it brought some anger, it brought a bunch of different feelings. I know for myself, it made me more humble. Just learning the difference between acceptance and tolerance. Talking about different people's struggles and their values throughout those struggles, and their belief systems and how everybody really has so many different beliefs based on their experiences, it's important to really look at your experiences. And how those beliefs have manifested in your life I guess. I also felt empowered by hearing other people sharing the stuff that they're going through but they're still going through it and still coming out on top. Not that I felt I was way down in the bottom, it was just nice to have normalization. That impact was significant for me. Just feeling normal and not feeling like I was going to be a bad social worker and not feeling like I was going to be a terrible person in practice because I have my own background and past.

4.3.4.3 Learning Congruent to Culture

Like the other Aboriginal participants, Ruby believed the portfolio process honored her cultural teachings and the processes by which she learns.

Storytelling to me is so important because of my culture and the way I was raised. Storytelling was the biggest form of cultural transmission for me. Both my parents are illiterate, so reading and writing in school wasn't even important. Hearing the stories is very important. Those are the things I remember the most, are the stories that people tell me rather than the stuff I might read out of a textbook. Although that stuff is important as well, I think the stories are more so. Because there's always something in a story somebody can say, something that will just touch me or it can make the hair stand up on the back of my arms or the back of my neck and it will speak to me and I'll remember it. And it might not be for a year when I'll remember it again, but something will trigger it to come out. I'll remember and I'll be like, oh you know, I've heard the same sort of thing and it kind of validates people, it makes them feel their experience is normal. And the storytelling part of it is huge. People don't want to sit and hear these big psychological terms or these big sociological terms, sometimes that's too big for them to even handle while they're going through whatever it is that they're going through. To just be real, and to be normal and to validate in such a caring way, through storytelling, I think is a really caring way to validate people. I think there's no comparison to making people valued. It's like you and I talking, just sharing, and that I think is really important. You don't have to be always walking

that line, and saying I'm walking this one direction all the time. I think it's really, really helpful for people.

An ethic of care is communicated through storytelling, validating people. Ruby also values different learning paths.

It's all about how I view others and how I view the world, and being okay with what I believe in, but still feeling connected to people even though we are different. That's definitely I think where the spiritual side is. It's all to do with connection.

Ruby's emphasis on the significance of storytelling and its validation in the portfolio process assisted her in learning in a manner congruent to her Aboriginal culture.

4.3.5 Marsha

Marsha is a thirty-eight year old addictions and mental health counsellor. Marsha recounted how engaging in the portfolio courses taught her to slow-down and be introspective as well as to honor the stories of others by listening effectively.

4.3.5.1 Self-reflection as Introspection

Throughout her interview, Marsha was clear that up until portfolio, she did everything quickly, such as having lists and ticking off when they were done, never slowing down. For Marsha, the self-reflection process encouraged her to take stock of her journey, to find connections between learning and experience.

My perception of what that would look like if I didn't have that piece where I really internalized it, would be just simply going through my third and fourth year just memorizing to memorize and to get through that test.

I had to internalize and think about okay well how would I express this, how is this in my life, what did I think about it? And it was so personal by the end of it. Everything that I was learning, I worked it through myself and it was like therapy. And in turn, when I sit with my clients, that's what I'm expecting them to do.

Like even thinking back about that one acrylic. It was like beginnings, building, sometimes endings, and that was just one thing, that whole picture, and I thought about in my life okay, what are the beginnings? What did they look like? What are

the relationships where I really built and what did that look like? And then the ending piece. What do endings look like in my life, what did that look like? Once again, introspection.

4.3.5.2 Power of the Sharing Circle

For Marsha, the sharing circle was a place where she learned to sit and listen. This listening meant she was learning from others, knowledge gained from other people's experiences. In contrast, book learning would have been a way for her to remain focused on her, whereas portfolio seminars encouraged her to think beyond herself, forming connections through peoples' experiences.

Because once again you get used to hearing other people's stories, so when you go into practice that's what you're hearing - you're hearing someone else's story and however many people in class you're seeing from portfolio class to portfolio class where they're going with their own journey. I know what I went through, but so and so went through this and I have a bit of an understanding of her struggles and what she was dealing with, and looking at each class member and that was kind of a good snapshot too. Then you just have that much more experience. I can learn from all the experiences I have, but if I can learn from the experiences you have and everyone else has, that means I don't have to personally experience them, I can just learn from your knowledge. So isn't that a wonderful way of learning? Instead of having to walk in your shoes, I can learn a bit from what you've learned.

If I didn't have portfolio, if I didn't learn from other people's experiences, I was simply going through four years of very centrally focused me, I need to get through this course so I can get my degree. I would of missed out on that knowledge of other people's experiences and what they went through, all I would of known is what I had. And I also wouldn't have been listening for four years to other people. Now I think I'm an okay listener, so that wasn't a skill that I necessarily needed to know, but if I hadn't, how would I have learned it? How do you learn to listen if you're a talker and you don't listen to people? But you think that maybe social work is a good niche for you, it's a fit for you, but if you're not a good listener then where do you learn to listen?

The experience of the portfolio courses taught Marsha to be both introspective as well as to connect with other by listening differently, stilling her mind and putting herself into the space of the sharing circle.

4.3.6 Mary

Mary is a fifty-four year old woman with a background in nursing and is now a hospital social worker since the completion of her BSW two years prior to the interview. The power of the portfolio experience was in the interaction with her peers and in the opportunity to self-reflect.

4.3.6.1 Power of the Sharing Circle

Mary perceived the connection through the emotional trust that developed among circle members facilitated a sharing of experiences emphasizing strength and resilience in adverse situations.

A connectedness with the others and it felt like you were sharing stuff that was probably really intimate and really scary at times, but with like-minded people. Just being able to share and feel some of what they were feeling too because some of them shared some really serious stuff. So to be able to know that they trusted me as well as I trusted them, it was really important to have that part of it. I don't know if the piece would of even come without that. And then when it came to the end of it, there was nobody with a great big surprise. I mean we all had sort of journeyed together with that part I think.

It gives you that idea that yeah, you can do this or you can come from this and still be okay, and you can teach others that this is a hard time for you but something can come from this. I think this offered that ability to really, really think about it a lot.

4.3.6.2 Significance of Self-reflection

Similar to other interview participants, Mary spoke to the importance of self-reflection in the portfolio process. Clarity came with this type of self-teaching, particularly in examining differential impacts and taking this with her from one situation to the next.

I think about anthropology and I'm thinking, what did I take that for? It was interesting to read all that stuff and to do that, but that was all about somebody else's reality. This was about my reality and the world how I saw it. And I sometimes think that when you go into this stuff you don't exactly know where

you're going with it, and to have that clarity, or have it clarified for you when you come to the end, you go, oh my word, that's exactly where I was at with it, I just didn't have the words with it. So I think that's like a self-taught feeling, I was feeling totally directionless after the first portfolio seminar, okay, where am I gonna go with this? What am I gonna do? To have to think about that. I couldn't open a textbook and figure it out, it's something that you have to do by yourself. I guess it's like a self-teaching. It's like putting all that down on paper, doing the work of physically developing something or building something, and then to actually write about it. I think it's really a good tool for us to go back to when we are in those positions where we're working in it and to go back and reflect, wow, yeah that was one of the things or that's something that I learned during that time and impacted me or was powerful. And from there you take it to the next situation you go into.

Mary was able to take the learnings of the portfolio courses and transpose them into other situations, indicative of a transference of learning from the educational setting and into personal and professional life.

4.3.7 Jane

Since the completion of her BSW degree two years prior to the interview, Jane has become a child protection supervisor. Jane found the entire portfolio course experience to be liberating to her as an individual woman, applying many of the concepts from the portfolio process into her personal and professional life.

4.3.7.1 Healing as Liberation

Jane perceived she was at a point in her life where she was playing the victim, rather than empowering herself to make change in her life and her workplace. The portfolio courses gave Jane the opportunity to work through experiences she believed were preventing her from fulfilling her maximum potential.

It was coming to learn to heal. It's not easy to heal, so not easy to heal, and to get to that point within yourself of allowing yourself to be okay with it. I think it's also beneficial to see that it's so easy to fall in that trap of feeling like you're the victim or feeling like the woe is me syndrome. How do I get past this and how do I learn from this?

For me, the whole process of the portfolio is such a liberation. It's so hard to describe, I think textbook learning is very rigid.

I found that was the piece that allowed me to take all the information that I've learned and all the tools that I've been able to utilize and use it in the ways that I wanted to and to also be creative in how I learned it and how I can show it back. But at the same time personally, the portfolio was very liberating to me because it allowed me to get through some of the pieces of my life that I hadn't been able, or that I hadn't allowed myself to get through. Partly because I didn't know the tools or I wasn't aware of the tools or I wasn't allowing myself to use those tools.

4.3.7.2 Power of the Circle

The power of the sharing in the circle during the portfolio process instilled in Jane sensitivity for value in differences among how people process their experiences. She refers to this as a more humanist perspective, an inherent value in group learning, where both the giver (story-teller) and receiver (listener) learn differently but together.

I also learned other pieces that have fit well for other people. That type of learning, I would not have learned had I had a regular instructor/class setting. It's given me definite sensitivity in terms of how other people process things and how some people will use a certain theory within their framework, and that doesn't mean that necessarily that we won't agree it just means that we have to respect the differences. I think those things stick out for me, definitely. And the sensitivity around that. And I think it brings the real humanistic perspective to things, that you wouldn't, that you wouldn't get. And there's so much to be said for other people's learning within a group. You can learn so much more and in such a shorter time period because you've got the emotion invested and involved, you've got the support of your peers when you get to that environment where you feel like you're a solid circle.

Taking my learning, molding it into how I see things, how it fits on me, how it fits on me in my profession and then how I'm going to show it to my peers and what they're going to learn from it. So it's basically a give and take.

The portfolio courses encouraged Jane to develop a stronger humanist perspective that she has been able to incorporate into her professional life.

4.3.8 Eva

Eva is a forty-one year old Aboriginal woman who held a social work diploma

prior to entering the BSW program. Eva experienced portfolios as vehicle for self-transformation and an opportunity to embrace her culture and celebrate it with others.

4.3.8.1 Healing as Transformation

This transformative process was a celebration of her spiritual self, finding her voice and electing to not participate in the secrecy of silence any longer. This resulted in a shift away from shame toward pride, as a woman with a voice in both the Aboriginal and Eurocentric worlds.

It was like telling a secret. Like we don't, I don't talk about myself, I don't talk about who I am or what I've learned or anything like that. I'm so humble, or I think I am, I don't talk about myself. And to talk about myself and my journey and my experience and my path to healing, it was really difficult. It was very emotional, a real emotional place. To begin to think about healing while you're learning, so that it doesn't hurt your practice eventually.

It was a real healing journey. Just bringing it to my practice, it's just deeper, at a deeper level. Not just that face value, the surface stuff that everybody needs to know, it goes deeper than that. It's really helped with my critical thinking skills as well. Just going there a little bit deeper.

And by this time, my spirit was so much stronger. I don't know what happened, a transformation. I found my own voice. I found where I needed to be, and who I needed to be this way you know with, or if I could be myself in mainstream. And if I could accept that. And then I could tell a story differently: without shame: without anger, with pride. Yes, with pride.

And you know, the funny thing is I didn't go to school to find me. I went to school, I had this idea of I need to go to school because I want to have a job. And not once during that whole time did I think about who I was, or where I needed to be, or what my journey was. Or that even my spirituality had anything to do with anything. And in the end, the path that I chose to walk on while I was in school was my spiritual path. And there's a lot of healing there for me that I didn't know that I was that ill.

4.3.8.2 Significance of Reflection

For Eva, self-reflection means stopping and thinking about the actions she has taken in the present and the past. Self-reflection also allowed her to think through the

processes she required in order for healing to begin. This healing, while intensely personal, was directly connected to her social work practice, ensuring her history and understandings did not negatively affect how she served her people.

The quiet time that I had to spend on my project, I was thinking and reflecting all the time about where I came from and how I got here and everything in-between. And those quiet times were really actually valuable, I could actually stop and think about the important things, where and what I needed to heal and what I needed to experience again. And to get through the difficult parts. It really opened up a whole other part of me.

It's mostly about reflection. Because I've learned the importance of reflection and to stop and reflect. Now I'm in the habit of it, I do it all the time in my practice. I think about what I've done, what I've said, how it needs to be different if I feel I've made a mistake. To begin to think about healing while you're learning so that it doesn't hurt your practice eventually.

It's like the artwork that I did, and I'm not saying it was like great artwork, but just sitting and having quiet reflection time to think about where, who and where I am, where I came from, how I got to be here, that has to be recognized. For me, it was important that somebody could hear that journey. Now I could connect to something else, and I connect from that to other things.

The portfolio courses to me, they were very valuable, because I found my way through reflection. I don't even know how to say it properly, it's just that simple. Because of that, I was able to get on a path to healing.

Eva perceived reflection as opportunity to build connection between all the elements of her journey during her transformation.

4.3.8.3 Learning Congruent to Culture

Similar to the other Aboriginal participants, Eva's interview revealed engaging in portfolio content and process as congruent to her Aboriginal culture. This is particularly apparent in the values expressed, such as humility and self-acceptance. The storytelling in the circle assisted Eva in finding her voice and expressing her cultural teachings to others, affirming them in herself as valuable and significant; worthy of transmission to

both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. With humility and pride comes a realness of self, a lack of pretence, and a conviction in her understandings.

The attitude's really different. The understandings are different. The respect and care for people is different. It comes from a different place. It's not a service thing, it's real. It feels real.

One of the things that portfolio did for me was it made me human and humble and I could just be who I am and be okay with that. So that part of me, that hey I'm going to be a social worker and I have a BSW, that arrogance that sometimes comes with an education, didn't need to be there. I really appreciate that I could leave it behind.

Thinking back now, I remember I really put a guard or a shield, something between so I didn't have to really feel. It was a good story to tell, that I remember thinking people need to know this, this story about Aboriginal people or about Aboriginal woman. And I was really careful not to make it about the people, that this is about me.

For Eva, the portfolio courses allowed her to heal, transform, and develop pride in her culture and social work practice.

4.3.9 Michelle

Michelle is a child protection worker who came to Alberta from Newfoundland only several months prior to starting the BSW program and holds a Bachelor of Arts from her previous educational experience. In her interview, she compared the experience of completing portfolio courses to her experiences in previous courses and related how the portfolio courses encouraged her to be self-reflective and value the learning from other peoples and cultures.

4.3.9.1 Significance of Self-Reflection

Self-reflection was a significant theme in Michelle's interview. This reflection encouraged her to slow down rather than making rash judgments, to complete a better assessment as a result. Context is also a part of the reflective process for Michelle. One's

own context, in terms of history, location, and perceptions, are part of the reflection process.

Doing the portfolio, it really slowed me down. Just stop and think about everything. For me, that's really helped a lot in practice because now if you get a phone call about a crisis, a client, or whatever, I really go to that stop and think place for a minute, not just jump on it type of thing. So it allowed me to add context to things. I guess even adding context to my own personal experiences and adding context to other people's experiences, and what people learned from that. You've got to understand where you've come from, where you've been, and where you think you're going. A good solid foundation under yourself. And if I wanted to do anything in the social work field, I think I needed to do that slow down process, self-reflect.

I think simply put, it makes you stop and think and slow down and collect more information. Make a better assessment.

I think it forced me to do that reflection piece, what do I really want to do with my life? I have this other degree and what do I want to do with it? I think portfolios, because they make you stop and think and reflect and look at your own life, I think it's definitely vital if you're considering a social work program. You really need to know where you're at, and where you've been in order to decide where you're going.

4.3.9.2 Shifting to Open Perspective

Reflecting on context brought Michelle to a different perspective about people. Her perspective became one of recognizing and appreciating strength and resilience in others, recognizing individuals and not just categorizing whole groups of people. This facilitated Michelle's shift in perspective to understand that some clients require services while others do not as opposed to applying the medical model where fault is in the individual rather than the circumstances.

I think it was valuable for me to learn that given anybody and everybody's situations and backgrounds, that anyone could be in someone else's situation. Looking at people as just people and saying okay, some people get through this on their own, some people get through with services.

It moved the whole medical model thing. I never liked it and I didn't know what to do with it. Like my first degree it was just so much solution-focused, fix this

ailment type of thing. But I think the portfolio opened me to not looking at just the ills of people, or our weaknesses, but looking at what makes them resilient. I mean, not to really single anyone out, but for me growing up in Newfoundland, I didn't have any experience whatsoever working with any Aboriginal. Just being in class with people who have been through hell and back again, but yet they've risen above it, and you know what makes them get through that?

I think there's something about Native people that their spirit is so big that it would never, never die. And that speaks to any culture.

Hearing people's stories and seeing them as individuals not as a group of people, and that whole thing of grouping people and categorizing is oppression itself. Looking at it that way – differently. I guess it was definitely new learning to learn about how we oppress people and never really given it much thought.

4.3.9.3 Power of the Sharing Circle

Michelle describes learning from the circle and its members as a learning she will carry with her for life. Learning outside of textbooks was highly praised in her interview, particularly the exchange of different stories and experiences. How people surmount challenges and obstacles in their lives to continue on their path enriched Michelle's understanding of the resiliency of the human spirit.

It's hard to put it in words, I think I learn more from experiences or hearing other people's experiences than I do from reading in the textbook.

It was different that way. And just even sharing stories and looking at different ways of learning, outside of the textbook. Learning from someone else talking, learning from someone else sharing their story. And I found that really amazing, given social work. You're working with people who go through lots of experiences, some of them are good and some of them are terrible. But how they go through that, how they go through the different challenges they face in their lives, how they get to where they are today, whether that's a healthy place or not. But how they go through that motion I guess. So it was different.

I think if there's anything I'll remember will be doing portfolios and learning stories from other people. I'll carry that for the rest of my life.

Michelle's perspective of humanity was profoundly altered as a result of engaging in the portfolio courses. She was able to gain understanding into the challenges others face and

have appreciation for the stories of others.

4.4 Bringing it all Together

The individual interview summaries reveal the participants' personal experiences doing the portfolio courses in the BSW program. There are two integral components to these experiences. The first is how each of the participants locates themselves in their journey – using a language of healing, reclaiming, freeing, liberation, transformation, pride, and change. The second is how each participant related the importance of the sharing circle in the process, the community of students; and how this provided hope, insight, understanding of diversity, appreciation of culture, support, belonging, validation, and safety. The visual image evoked throughout the interviews and directly referred to in seven of them was of the medicine wheel, a powerful concept among some Aboriginal groups. The wheel represents a desire to find balance and harmony, recognition of where personal and professional growth needs to occur, and a place to anchor stories of development. When the medicine wheel was presented to the sharing circle participants, all believed this to be an accurate representation of their journey through portfolio. Figure 4.1 illustrates the composite of these individual experiences of doing portfolios.

The core of the wheel is connection. Participants were clear, in both the interviews and the sharing circle that the axis of all components of their journey was of connection. Connection to other students in the class and their experiences, connection to a personal path of learning, connection to families, communities, and the social work profession.

Connection is representative of the learning that occurs through relationship rather

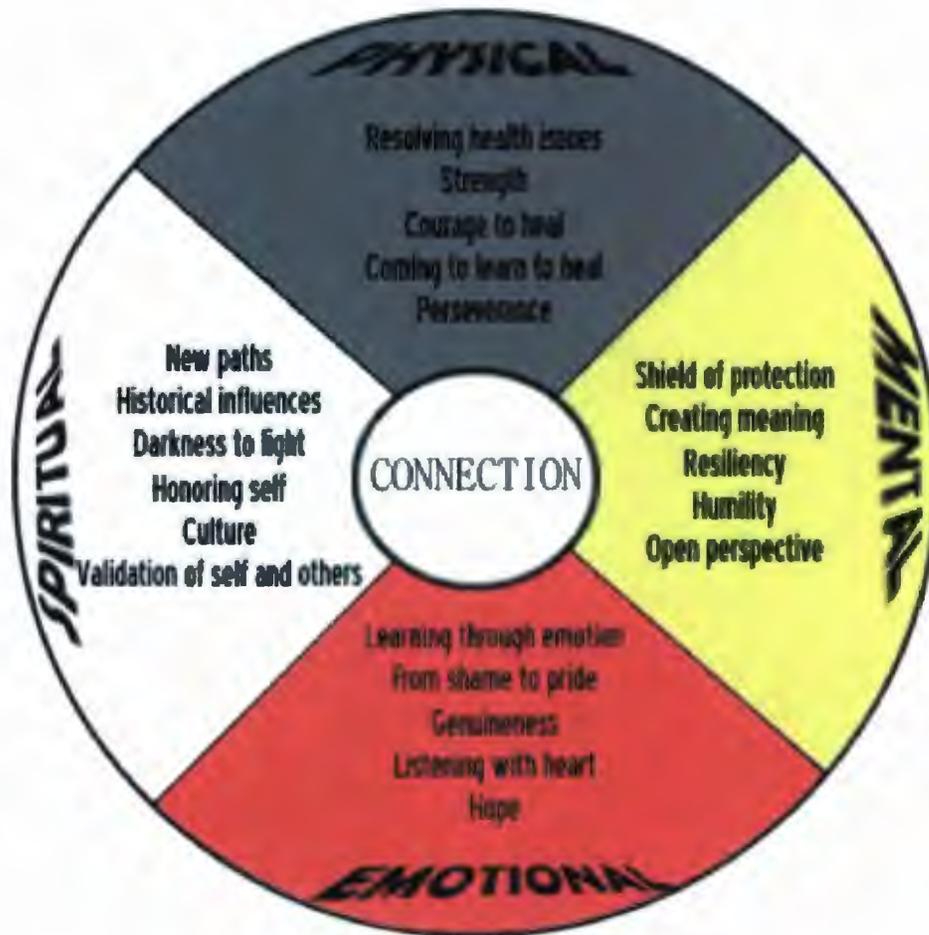


Figure 4.1 Journey in the Medicine Wheel

than separate from it. With connections come strength, resilience, and the courage to move forward. Each journey was unique in terms of where they started and ended in the medicine wheel, some chose to focus on one particular element, such as the spiritual journey, while others started in the physical realm, dealing with cancer or addictions, and then moving toward mental and emotional strength. Participants communicated the importance of movement and fluidity of the medicine wheel. While the representation may appear as a static construct, the wheel is in motion, shifting and turning dependent upon experiences and knowledge at any given point in time. The ideal is to achieve balance within the wheel, so that each quadrant supports healing and wisdom in all other quadrants and this is a process of life-long learning rather than a destination. The wheel, as presented here, is of the participants' journey of portfolio at the moment in time the interviews occurred. It is fluid and contextual, and becomes central to understanding the processes of the portfolio experience and how the portfolios inform social work practice.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the stories of the nine participants through the extrapolation of prevalent themes from each interview. The medicine wheel became the symbolic representation of the individual participants and illustrative of the context in which student learning occurred.

There are several themes transcending the individual interviews, weaving common threads in the tapestry of the portfolio experiences. All participants spoke to the significance of the sharing circle and the exchange of personal stories. The sharing of lived experience encouraged the undergraduate students to learn differently, through story rather than textbooks. Learning differently encouraged the participants to embrace

different ways of knowing, reaching a different understanding of some dimension of self previously not understood. These different ways of knowing included knowing through emotion, connecting to subjective understanding, and valuing the subjective as a part of social work practice rather than removed from it. Each story became a part of the journey in the medicine wheel.

There was unique emphasis on cultural identity for the Aboriginal participants. Struggling with historical influences of colonialism and a history of shame, the opportunity to share personal stories from a subjective understanding influenced the development of a sense of pride in their culture. Additionally, these participants experienced the educational system differently. Rather than the classical educational approach of lectern and technology, the use of the sharing circle and incorporation of the oral tradition into the learning environment gave these participants value and worth in themselves as students and equal contributors to a safe and trusting educational milieu.

Ideas of balance and harmony; whether expressed as healing, transformation, or liberation; was another dominant theme transcending the individual interviews. For participants, education needs to speak to the person in the professional, valuing the subjective experience and history of the learner in education.

While this chapter puts forward the individual voice, the following chapter is an analysis of the collective voice and wisdom of the study participants. It presents both the extrapolated themes from the collective as well as the completion of the model that emerged through analysis and the metaphoric symbolism developed by the sharing circle when the initial analysis was presented.

Chapter Five

Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of analysis using the modified grounded theory approach outlined in the methodology chapter. Two primary components emerged during the data analysis process. Each provides unique insight into the collective voice of participants' experiences with the portfolio courses and their perception of how it informs their social work practice. The first is a one-dimensional model presented in a conventional format; a linear approach to analysis demonstrating clear linkages from the different constructs, themes, and composite elements. The second is representative of a three dimensional image that becomes a metaphor in understanding the participants' journey. It captures the basic social process revealed in the initial analysis; further enhanced, modified, and expanded in the sharing circle with participants. The two components are important manifestations of the portfolio process. Students begin with a 'blank canvas' and over time, create meaningful images and artifacts representative of their learning journey over the course of the term, a journey shaped by their own needs while being informed by the sharing and stories of others in the circle.

5.2 Thematic Model

The thematic model extrapolated from the nine interview transcripts developed through a continuous iterative process. This process ensured the evidence - the interview excerpts - supported the collective voice of the participants. The elements represent smaller ideas captured by the larger theme. The words chosen for both elements and themes arise directly from the transcripts. This enables accurate representation of the

collective voice of research participants. It also ensures the researcher stays close to the data rather than data becoming so abstract as to render the collective voice silent or meaningless. Upon presentation of the model to participants at the sharing circle, two changes were made. The first was to change the theme 'genuine' to 'authentic to self' as participants believed this was a more apt term to describe what they had expressed in the interviews. Second, the original model held as a theme 'education needs to shift'. All participants strongly voiced desire to have this be a construct separate from the others. In the final analysis, education was moved to be its own construct. The circle was clear in the need to carry the message of change forward, ensuring it stands out and does not get consumed by any other part of the model (originally 'education needs to shift' was subsumed as a theme under applications). Their voice needs to be carried forward to promote change in social work education. Table 5.1 presents an overview of the linear thematic model.

The following sections present the four resulting categories or stages, including the themes contained within them. The reader is cautioned in considering a 'stage' as an indication participants moved through a process in a discrete, temporal manner. Rather, each stage is overlapping and, experienced at different times by different participants, dependent upon their learning goals in portfolio and prior experience and knowledge.

5.3 The Process: "How Did you Learn It?"

A major construct that emerged through analysis of the different elements and groupings of themes was that of the portfolio process itself, or "how did you learn it?" Participants spoke of the learning process, and coming to know. There was an initial

Table 5.1 Thematic Model

| <u>Stage</u> | <u>Theme</u> | <u>Element</u> |
|---|---------------------------------|--|
| The Process “How did you learn it?” | Initial Struggle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlearning how learning occurs • Cultural barriers • Being vulnerable means taking risks |
| | Self-Reflection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning differently • Looking inward • Time to process |
| | Integration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience informs knowledge • Learning who you are • Journeying together |
| The Learnings “What did you learn?” | Shifting Perspective | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-thinking practice models • Knowing impact of self on profession and practice • Openness to difference • Knowing it is client’s journey |
| | Emotional connectivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning through emotion • Finding balance and harmony |
| The Application “How do you use it?” | Using the process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking circle back to colleagues and clients • Listening differently • Teaching others |
| | Advocating | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For agency/policy • Seeing strength and resilience in clients |
| | Authentic to self | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m no expert • Walking the walk |
| Education “We want more Ghandis don’t we?” | Value different ways of knowing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start where the student is • We all learn differently |
| | Challenge yourself | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value experience |
| | Learning is life-long | (not developed sufficiently for elements to emerge) |

struggle during the first portfolio course as they challenged themselves to understand portfolio, followed by the beginning of the development of self-reflection skills, and the eventual integration of their learning. Although the struggle changed as they challenged themselves differently and began to embrace a different way of learning and coming to know, the process remained consistent throughout two years of completing portfolio projects. Self-reflection deepens over time becoming an integral part of their professional practice, and the learning acquired through portfolio becomes integrated into who they are as a person and as a professional.

5.3.1 Initial Struggle

Two primary contextual considerations enhance appreciation for what participants identified as the initial struggle in undertaking the portfolio journey and meaningfully engaging in the experience. These considerations include social understanding of what learning is, given prior educational experiences, and family and community mores about speaking of self and personal experiences.

Research participants spoke of receiving permission during this initial struggle. The permission was in the form of engagement with this new form of learning, and letting go of previous educational learning, where they state it is parroting what the instructor wants. Instead, they began to develop expectations of themselves in determining what it was they wanted to portray and to learn. Once they had achieved internal permission, the external support from other students and from the instructor, was an essential component of the process toward attaining what was termed freedom to pursue their learning. This basic social process, of permission, support, and then freedom,

was articulated by each participant in the interview process, and considered essential in addressing the “how did you learn it” stage of portfolio experiences.

5.3.1.1 Unlearning How Learning Occurs

Participants undertaking the portfolio experienced an initial sense of cognitive dissonance between what they had been taught about learning and the many different approaches to learning introduced through the portfolio.

It means I must of, well obviously, I grew up in an educational system that only supported outside measures of judgment. So as a student in school or in learning I didn't learn to value my own judgement on something, it was whether I got an 'A' or a 'B' or a 'C' or whatever that was that decided if I was worthwhile or whether I was intelligent. It was really hard to take it away from that and to look at my own work and value my own work and have to demonstrate what I had learned.

I had to learn to be internally motivated, internally competent in myself, and not always look to others to tell me whether I was doing something right or not. So, you need to learn to have that confidence, you have to trust yourself to do a good job.

Learning how to look at your own experiences and valuing your own experiences and your own expression. I never put much value into myself. The value that I had out there was valuing my textbooks, valuing what people were teaching me and parroting what people were teaching me. And that's where I found value in education, but in the portfolio I had to find value in myself and express that somehow and make my meanings, my understandings, the way I see things, and see that as being valuable to practice and valuable to how I'm going to be a social worker.

The idea of learning to internally value and evaluate rather than rely on external sources of validation and measurement is significant in social work practice. Sound judgment is an expectation of social work practitioners, yet if they have never been given permission to internally trust their abilities nor been encouraged to develop the skill to develop these qualities, how are they to attain and apply them in their different practice settings?

I was still churning out results and churning out papers and churning out everything. I guess I just hold more value in it. It just seemed like the five years of

my first degree was fine, I don't have a problem with it, but I think I learned more about myself and about other people from doing portfolios.

The first portfolio was probably where I had to wrap my head around a different type of learning. It was really reflection based, where you really had to look inside and figure out your own meanings and look at your own stuff; changing from a complete educational based, research, cited work, and going into something more personal where you can use 'I' and talk about feelings and talk about the process of examining yourself. It was really different to try and change that but I think I got the most out of that piece of learning.

Over the course of the first term of doing portfolio, participants gave themselves permission to learn differently. This included letting go of expectations of others and making determination with what they wanted to learn, how they were going to learn it, and how they would express their learning. All expressed a sense of support in the process, both from the other students at seminars, and from the instructor who guided them through the process. This resulted in a sense of freedom and valuing of this different way of learning. This is a reflection of the objective/subjective dichotomy present in education, where the objective is held as the only legitimate type of learning. As they began to learn differently, participants shifted to a subjective understanding of how learning occurs.

5.3.1.2 Cultural Barriers

For the Aboriginal participants, there was an added challenge to the initial struggle in learning differently. This involved a sense of shame, transmitted from the family and Eurocentric society, devaluing the traditional Aboriginal way of knowing.

It was like telling a secret. Like I don't talk about myself, I don't talk about who I am or what I've learned or anything like that. I'm so humble, or I think I am, I don't talk about myself. And to talk about myself and my journey and my experience and my path to healing, it was really difficult. It was very emotional, a real emotional place. Thinking back now I remember I really put like a guard or a shield up, something between so I didn't have to really feel.

Because I was brought up the idea of you don't talk, you don't trust, you don't feel. We weren't allowed to really discuss how you were feeling, you didn't express how you were feeling. The hardest thing that I remember doing was, where do I start?

The seminar format, sitting in a circle and sharing understandings, experiences, and stories, was the first time these Aboriginal students felt their way of being in the world, their culture, was valued and placed as an equal alongside the Eurocentric model.

With others affirming for me, saying that you have the skill, you deserve to be sitting here with us - my confidence just grew and grew and grew. All of a sudden they were asking for help in some way and I was able to provide the knowledge, and then all of a sudden for me I felt, yeah, I do deserve to be here, I do know what I am doing, and I was saying it for myself and believing it.

Looking at symbols really means a lot to me as an Aboriginal person and having the opportunity to express yourself and bring your knowledge to a different level, that was the opportunity I needed.

Being able to talk comfortably about whom they are in the world and what they value, to share their stories and their understanding of their traditional culture, led to reclamation and healing.

Because it was a good story to tell. I remember thinking, people need to know this, this story about Aboriginal people or about Aboriginal women. And I was really careful not to make it about the people, that this is about me.

You take all the feelings and all that chaos and you're able to put it into what you were learning and that in itself was healing. You're getting rid of it, not only verbally, emotionally, but you're also writing it out.

And by this time, my spirit was so much stronger, like by then, I don't know what happened, a transformation. I found my own voice. I found where I needed to be, and who I need to be this way with, or if I could be myself in mainstream, and if I could accept that. Then I could tell a story differently, with pride.

The portfolio courses are infused with an interpretivist paradigm using critical feminist pedagogy. For Aboriginal participants, this allowed for a process similar to Freire's (1970) notion of conscientisation. No longer do they perceive themselves as victims or

objects carrying shame, but as empowered human beings.

From this process, these participants, now practicing social workers, are able to assist others from a position of strength and resilience. Modeling the value of other cultural practices, and not just speaking to them, was a benefit to other participants. Several spoke of the learning they achieved by listening to these stories, learning culture, and appreciation for the strength of Aboriginal peoples.

I can learn from all the experiences I have, but if I can learn from the experiences you have and everyone else has, that means I don't have to personally experience them, I can just learn from your knowledge. So isn't that wonderful way of learning, instead of having to walk in your shoes I can learn a bit from what you've learned.

Seeing everybody as human, as a person that has rights.

It was a reciprocal teaching and learning process encouraging non-Aboriginal participants to bear witness to the stories of the Aboriginal students.

The sharing of stories was an important piece. For me growing up in Newfoundland, I didn't have any experience whatsoever working with Aboriginal people. The only things I knew were what I saw on the news and it was all bad. Being in class with people who have been through hell and back again, but yet they have risen above it, really broke down those stigmas, seeing them as individuals and not just a group of people, that whole thing of grouping people and categorizing is oppression itself, so, just looking at it differently.

And I think there is something about Native people that their spirit is so big that it would never, never die. And that speaks to any culture.

Like with clients, there's no them and us you, maybe that's part of the medicine wheel, we're all together on that medicine wheel. We're all together in this, just in different places and different parts.

There was a shared but differential benefit – those of the minority, oppressed cultures were able to gain confidence in their abilities, finding their voice; those of the majority dominant culture were able to learn to create space for the voice of all cultures.

5.3.1.3 Being Vulnerable Means Taking Risk

Participants spoke of the initial struggle to engage meaningfully in portfolio as including giving them permission to take risks by showing vulnerability. This happened over time, as safety and trust developed in the learning environment. As this transpired, there was an experience where it was 'okay to be me', to openly share trials and celebrations, to ask questions of others and seek affirmations in the journey.

Trusting to how important and kind of freeing self-reflection is and even though you can expose yourself you can survive it and know that you don't always have to be the competent one. We can all learn from each other. In portfolio we learned something from everybody.

Many participants spoke of how showing vulnerability is how clients must feel when they first tell their story, and how social workers need to listen to the story and create the safety and trust for this to occur.

You get used to hearing other people's stories, so when you go into practice that's what you're hearing – you're hearing someone else's story and however many people in class you're seeing from portfolio class to portfolio class where they're going with their own journey.

My clients and other people everywhere, like who are you? How many parts of you are there? Do you have a darkness, do you have to keep something, what do you do with it?

Knowing when to talk and when to shut up. I recognized that all I could really do was create a safe place to talk.

The initial struggle for participants who experienced portfolios involved unlearning or deconstructing previous understandings of learning processes and the resultant knowledge. This involved gaining permission to learn differently with the instructor and other students communicating support. The initial journey for Aboriginal participants included overcoming cultural barriers; taking the risk to share whom they are in the world, leading to a sense of pride rather than shame. As students attended to other

stories through the sharing circle in different portfolio seminars, they began to shift understandings of learning. The result was freedom to pursue a learning journey determined primarily by them as individuals.

The use of a language of freedom is significant. Classical education has traditionally imposed externally determined constructs of what will be learned and how it is to be learned. It is then imposed upon the learner, where conformity to these external standards is necessary in order to be 'successful' in education. Learner-focused education, as articulated by Dewey (1938), Freire (1985), and critical education scholars such as Giroux (2003), advocate for an educational paradigm embracing the subjective experience and knowledge of the student. With this shift to internally driven learning, comes a sense of freedom from the oppressive nature of objective constructs used in classical education. Study participants discovered this freedom in shifting to the learner focused model prevalent in the self-reflexive portfolio courses. It is at this point in the portfolio experience that an understanding of self-reflection emerged.

5.3.2 Self-Reflection

All nine research participants stressed the importance of self-reflection to the portfolio experiences and to their current social work practice. Each elucidated how significant self-reflection became in helping them to understand where they came from, who they are, and what they have to offer.

5.3.2.1 Learning Differently

One element in the theme of self-reflection is learning differently. Instead of learning how to complete assignments, to write, and to complete tests, the portfolio courses provided opportunity to learn differently. This learning opened up a different

understanding of how learning occurs, including the mediums through which it can occur. For Aboriginal participants, affirming learning outside of book knowledge was also a source of validation for cultural practices.

Storytelling is so important because of my culture and the way I was raised, storytelling was the biggest source of cultural transmission for me. Both my parents were illiterate, so reading and writing in school wasn't even important. Stories speak to me and I will remember it. It is a really caring way to validate people.

I think that's the most powerful way of learning, if you can utilize it within yourself, if you can absorb it and digest it and let it pertain to you in some way where you can learn from it, grow from it, and also teach it to your peers so they can learn from it. Textbook knowledge is so rigid; you don't take anything from it. I think the creativity part, that sometimes to help somebody you don't just sit there and talk about the problem. So knowing through portfolio that there are all sorts of different ways to reach people.

Learning differently is an important element in self-reflection. In shifting understanding of what learning was, participants placed themselves in a position where they began to open themselves up to a different way of learning and therefore, of coming to know. Instead of looking externally for guidelines and expectations, the interview analysis reveals participants beginning to engage in an inward process of self-reflection.

5.3.2.2 Looking Inward

The ability to incorporate elements of self-reflection, including looking inward, being aware of self in processes with clients and colleagues, and the need for continual evaluation of practice, were all outcomes of learning to be self-reflective.

If you're using self-reflection and self-knowledge as a means of dealing with a problem, it's about learning to be honest with yourself. So if you have a problem with somebody; then I use that process of self-reflection that began with the first portfolio. I have to be very, very conscious of being task orientated and that's how that has transferred into my practice. I have to be very careful about not making lists for people and checking them off.

I took a lot of things personally and I over-generalized quite a bit with people, but it made me realize where my triggers were. Big time. If I didn't do portfolio I

probably would of never understood my triggers. Maybe a month ago, I went to my supervisor and said I don't think I can work with this client. It would be unethical for me to work with this client because I actually feel triggered by this client. And she was like, oh well awesome, I can't believe you identified that, do you want to talk about your trigger a little bit?

Self-reflection encourages practitioners to monitor themselves in practice, to recognize when they are being triggered or when their tendencies may create difficulties in the work setting. This self-understanding is attributed to reflective skills where there is a heightened sense of self-awareness.

5.3.2.3 Time to Process

Time was important in the portfolio journey. In direct comparison to classical education models, where learning is measured in discrete units throughout a given term, portfolio is a gradual process where outcome is the end product demonstrating learning over the entirety of the term. Participants spoke of how the time to stop and think, slowing down, and time to process increased their ability to be reflective.

Where I was running full-tilt, it was an escape mechanism. I was running full-tilt and I was doing absolutely everything and I had no time to process anything. Taking the time to look back, all of a sudden I realized what I had gone through, what the links were between people and relationships and I guess the enormity of some things.

Doing the portfolio, it really slowed me down. Just kind of a stop and think about everything. For me, that's really helped a lot in practice because now, if you get a phone call about a crisis, a client, or whatever, I really go to that stop and think place for a minute. It really allowed me to add context to things.

The quiet times that I had to spend on my project I was thinking and reflecting all the time about where I came from and how I got here and everything in between. They were really valuable. I could actually stop and think and the important things. It really opened up a whole other part of me, the quiet reflection time.

The slowing down of the process and taking the time to self-reflect translates into social work practice. Participants were clear in how this slowing down benefits their different

work environments.

Simply put, it makes you stop and think and slow down and collect more information. Make a better assessment.

It's mostly about reflection. Because I've learned the importance of reflection and to stop and reflect. Now I'm in the habit of it, I do it all the time in my practice. I think about what I've done, what I've said, how it needs to be different if I feel I've made a mistake.

Perhaps of most significance in the self-reflection process is the construct of time.

Participants communicated in many different stories, how this type of learning, a gradual processing over time, was not only beneficial, but allowed them to shift understandings, perspectives, and practice ideas. There is a clear message; those colleagues who appeared to not slow down and to not engage in self-reflection, approach clients with a *"this is what you did wrong and you need to fix it"* mentality. Another stated *"In fact, they were more busy filling out the paperwork and the blanks on the paper rather than thinking of the people they were serving."*

I think without having some experience and being able to do that self-reflection piece, I don't think you would make it in those fields. I just think you would burn out in no time. And a lot of has to do with getting your clients to do things that really, that's what a portfolio is. That's what we've done, that self-reflection piece. We try and get our clients in that whole frame of mind, so they can make the changes in their lives that they need to make.

The saddest thing is seeing people in our field who are unhealthy, who aren't reflecting, who aren't processing; and I actually cringe when I have to work with some of them cause they seem arrogant, they seem not as accepting. They're not as humble or, they don't approach things with humility.

Self-reflection is critical in a profession of serving people. Self-reflection, as perceived by participants, is an important prerequisite in the development of conscientisation, self-reflexivity, and praxis. These practitioners transfer these internal processes utilized

during portfolio into practice. Self-reflection is one of the ways participants are able to engender the subjective in social work practice.

Self-reflection is formative learning. Rather than a summative or end product where learning acquisition is measurable, self-reflection is a process developed and used over time by practitioners in their practice. It is indicative of learning as continuous, that with each experience and acquisition of new knowledge is acquired, allows the self-reflexive practitioner to deepen understanding, shift perspective, and be creative and flexible in her/his practice approach. This formative learning is strongly espoused by Schön (1983) in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. According to Schön, the development of solid reflective abilities needs to be paramount in social work education.

5.3.3 Integration

As the portfolio journey unfolded and students had time to process, an integration of the formal book knowledge and self-knowledge transpired. Research participants disclosed how this integration of knowledge into self-understanding was empowering to them as persons and as professionals in practice. Integration echoes the concept of praxis as participants merge practice, experience, and formal knowledge.

5.3.3.1 Experience Informs Knowledge

Research participants place value in applying experience to inform social work practice. This type of integration, where experience and knowledge merge, had a profound impact on their personal and professional self. Engaging in self-reflection through tools such as portfolio encourages integration of lived experience with the

participants' knowledge systems, inspiring confidence in decision-making ability in working with people.

I really felt connected in a way that I've never felt connected to people or to understandings and theories, to beliefs, to values, to myself.

Portfolio really takes you above and beyond the theory of social work and the methods of social work. It helps you to look at your own personal experiences, validate them, value them, find an understanding, find connection to your practice.

I'm confident in what I know because I know I've put a lot of thought into it, that I didn't just get there. It comes from learning about myself, learning through the courses I've taken, combining all that knowledge, through life experiences, that's what I use.

I think I have to honor my boundaries, I have to make sure that if I do get to a position where I'm not doing well, I need to be okay with that and to step back and say, look, this is too tough for me.

The idea that experience informs knowledge and one can become integrated into the other is an important component to the development of reflexive practice. It implies attending to one's positionality, that is, both the person in the professional as well as professional practice. Experience informing knowledge fits well with the post-modernist rejection of the singular objective truths espoused by the positivist paradigm. Contrary to the positivist assertion that objective knowledge needs to determine experience, the post-modernists, such as Roseneau (1992) and Lather (1991) argue that all knowledge is created through interaction. Research participants upheld this post-modernist belief, speaking to an integrative process where experience informs knowledge. Like the post-modernists, participants expressed a belief that the person, including his/her values, perspective, and past experiences cannot be considered apart from the professional.

5.3.3.2 Learning Who You Are

Participants spoke of learning who they are through the portfolio journey. Many expressed this as the foundation of their social work practice model. Knowing self was perceived as an essential component to keeping your ‘stuff’ separate from that of clients and in preventing burn-out.

I think to go into this profession you got to understand where you've come from, where you've been, and where you think you're going. A good solid foundation under yourself.

For me, in terms of my learning, going back to my roots of course is where I came from and it's always impacted who I am, what I wanted to do with my life, what my goals have been professionally and personally. I think it's a huge part of how it contributes to what methods I choose to use in my day to day practice at work.

There is recognition of the need for a foundation of self in practice, that who you are influences the methods you apply in social work practice. Using critical feminist pedagogy, a learning environment can be created that instills a reflection or examination of personal historical influences and how the resulting values and beliefs emerge. For participants, this created a solid foundation upon which to engage in practice. Rather than remaining as something undesirable or separate from practice, the subjective self becomes a part of practice.

5.3.3.3 Journeying Together

‘We are all in this together’ is an important element in the integration process. Interview transcripts revealed a community of learners in the portfolio journey. The value of this was apparent to many participants who had also experienced other educational programs, either college or university, where they did not know each other’s names and did not engage in meaningful relationships.

I feel sad for the people that I hear have been in classes together for two years and don't know anything about their neighbour. Or sitting in straight rows and just answering tests and that just seems like such waste of time. That there was so much that they could have learned from each other.

Participants placed immeasurable value on sharing and listening as a form of learning and enriching their social work practice.

The portfolio is about that, it's about sharing who you are, how you learn, what you've learned in some way that's significant and special to you to the other people in your class. I mean sure it's to your instructor and that, but in truth it really is to the other people in the class. That creates that community that you have.

The unity of everybody, we're all supporting each other, we're becoming a family. All of a sudden in every community I have a contact person. And it was quite fortunate because many people went into different areas of the helping profession.

We all have to work together in our communities; we're all each other's resources. And the healthier your resources are, the more likely our clients are going to benefit from that.

What is evident in this first portion of "how did you learn it?" exploring the research participants' experiences with portfolio is the simultaneous process of both learning individually while also learning as a collective. The connection of the sharing in the circle combined with the exchange of stories, led to a type of subjective understanding of who they are in the world as well as how they fit into the social work profession.

A positivist orientation to education places students in a competitive situation for the attainment of the higher grades where objective criteria determines student ranking. Contrary to this orientation, infusing the subjective in education provides opportunity to create a climate of mutual support in a learning journey primarily determined by each individual student. As each student has a different starting point based upon an already present foundation, the amount of growth may actually be similar due to the different

starting points in the learning. No one person's learning is at the expense of the other as learning itself is highly individualized.

There was clarity in the message that self-reflection is paramount to good social work practice, as is modeling of the processes educators expect students to apply in the practice world. It was not a written paper or studying for an exam that was the medium for the learning. It was a sense of community, commitment, and humility in being part of a process that transcended the individual while simultaneously honoring the individual journey. There is a reflexive awareness and a process of conscientisation from the dialogue. This is consistent with the goals of learning within critical theory informed by post-modernist understanding of knowledge creation.

5.4 The Learnings: "What Did You Learn?"

Equal in significance to how participants described they learned is the sharing of what they learned by engaging in portfolio. One prevalent theme is a shift in perspective about humanity; including family, self, and clients. For the second theme, participants express a depth of emotional connectivity to learning that led to identification of the power of the sharing circle and the stories of others as paramount in finding professional and personal balance and harmony.

The basic social process in this stage of "what did you learn?" is healing, confidence, and transformation. This process is not linear but rather an ongoing occurrence throughout the two years. As participants experienced each portfolio they spoke of the profound healing that was occurring. This healing may have been emotional, spiritual, or in the reconstruction of their personal story from a place of understanding rather than judgment. As one participant stated:

A lot of times we as human beings, because we can't see what's ten feet in front of us we judge it before we even get to that ten feet. With portfolio, I always keep that in mind too. That people have a tendency to pass judgment before things actually proceed. I was the biggest judger of them all. I judged myself before I even gave myself the chance to do it.

As perspective shifts so too does understanding, and with this understanding, a confidence in perspective indicated by teaching others, and in this, a transformation begins. Participants were clear at the sharing circle following the initial data analysis, that transformation be the language construct used to convey how they perceived their learning from portfolio. The language construct of transformation resonates with Derrida's (1978) explanation of deconstructionism and re-authoring by shifting away from self-judgment toward acceptance of the path taken.

Self-acceptance echoes Lather's (1991) and other post-modernists' assertions that people ascribe meaning to their own stories as they are the author of them. Meaning is applied based upon the unique contextual understandings of the person rather than some expert authority. It is through the ascription of meaning that each person becomes the expert of his/her story, moving to a place of liberation or empowerment (Freire, 1985). Utilization of feminist liberatory pedagogy in education can assist students in this liberation rather than furthering the positivist orientation infused with ideas of social control where only those who conform to externally imposed standards 'measure up'. If a post-modernist perspective is infused in a critical understanding of education, judgment is withheld and students can experience themselves as empowered social agents. The process of the circle and community of learners utilizing principles of feminist pedagogy serves as the setting for this occurrence in an educational milieu.

5.4.1 Shifting Perspective

A prevalent learning emerging from portfolios was a shift in perspective. Participants disclosed a sense of openness as a result of this undertaking. This openness, considered a more humanist perspective, allowed them to have a better understanding of how historical contexts influence people. It encouraged reflection on the impact of personal history on social work practice. They communicated that while it is important to keep your 'stuff' separate from your work; it is inevitable that your practice will only be as healthy as you are in yourself. While separate yet connected may appear as somewhat contradictory perspectives, the idea is social workers are people serving people and therefore need to be healthy to do this well. Lastly, all participants discussed in conjunction with openness in their perspective a different appreciation for and understanding of difference.

5.4.1.1 Re-thinking Practice Models

The exposure to different perspectives and understandings resulting from hearing the stories of others, led many participants to disclose a sense of multiple models to social work practice, and embrace a model that was a better fit with who they are as social workers. The understanding of multiple models of practice and a reflection of a singular focus on the medical model highlights the need for social work education to develop practice models that draw on both the historical foundation of the Charitable Organization Societies and Settlement House Movement, an integrated approach to practice honoring both perspectives.

The whole medical model I never liked it, and I didn't know what to do with it but I think this portfolio opened me to not looking at just the ills of people, or our weaknesses, but looking at what makes them resilient. To sit back and look at the different contexts.

I think it was something about living in the North and what it's like to live up here and how it's very different from everywhere else, even home.

The context gives you where they've been. It also gives you clues to what their strengths are. There's so many clues in context and letting people share their story.

I tried to take the best of both worlds, you know I look at things in an alternative way, but I always go back, refer to that medicine wheel and the stories that I always say when I was doing the teachings. That's what I do in my practice, we always have to look at the big picture.

Contextualizing the lived experiences of others as well as their own lives assists these practitioners in understanding the influence of environmental variables, including geographical location and history. This echoes the fundamental philosophy of the Settlement House Movement and the idea of 'living in the community' to achieve awareness of the influence of contextual factors on the lives of people (Leighninger, 1987). Context, in reaching for understanding of different ways of knowing and interacting with the world, is important to the participants in honoring the client's journey. The implication is contextual realities of both the client and the practitioner has significant influence in the selection of a social work practice model.

5.4.1.2 Knowing Impact of Self on Profession and Practice

Analysis illustrates recognition for who you are in the world, personal history, experiences, knowledge, and understandings, and the impact of self on the profession and on social work practice.

I know what I learned, there have been my lessons and I've evaluated them, and I know I've learned parameters to evaluate things by that are my measuring sticks, my yard sticks that I've learned. I have my own process that I trust.

How you are with yourself, that's how you're going to practice.

I think that, the values, your personal experiences, the things that you process as you're growing up, it molds who you are as a person. In terms of being a social

worker, I think it's important to be aware, be careful, because that can negatively impact your profession too and your personal life.

I think we have to know how we are personally influencing a situation. How our interpretation of what's going on is influenced by our life experience. We have to know about that lens with which we look at the world so we can take that into account in working with the other person.

When you are dealing with Aboriginal people, they want to see the person, not the title or who you represent.

The principle reflected is who we are in our lives, how healthy we are influences how we practice social work. This encapsulates the core idea of engendering the subjective in social work practice. None of the nine participants indicated a desire or goal of separating out the personal from the professional. All saw a need to be aware of how the context of one influences the context of the other. With this awareness, the impact is perceived as beneficial rather than harmful. Bringing the person into the professional reflects Davis' (1985) assertion of the place for the female voice in social work education. The female voice of a connected knowing, valuing relationship, intuition, and narrative is articulated by the research participants as significant in engendering the subjective in social work practice. The idea of who we are is how we practice is most reflective of the female voice.

5.4.1.3 Openness to Difference

One of the elements in a shifting perspective for participants as they experienced the portfolios was toward less of a tendency to dichotomize difference as either right or wrong but to be aware that difference was something inevitable, not to be personalized.

We all came to the classroom with different challenges, different walks of life, different ways of doing things, doing things differently than everybody else. But we all came there for a reason; we all went there to be helpers of people that need the help.

I probably would have been indoctrinating my clients into certain values and beliefs that I might have had, and now I'm okay with people having their own values, beliefs, their own point of views. I don't get my back up every time somebody disagrees with me.

It's given me a definite sensitivity in terms of how other people process things: some people will use a certain theory, within their framework, and that doesn't mean that necessarily we won't agree it just means that we have to respect the differences.

That was one of the parts of portfolio – seeing how everybody else saw their learning, how they wanted to tell you and show you, their experience, and that in itself informs you that people really, really do look at the world differently and people really do interpret things differently.

To embrace diversity as a part of the human condition, that different paths may still be informed by a common value, is a part of the understanding that resulted from the portfolios. This can inform social work education. Diversity implies an acceptance for both the objective and subjective, a valuing of both the male and female voice rather than a reliance on one at the expense of the other. In honoring both, social work education would model diversity in its own practice. Embracing diversity is one of the core values espoused by the social work profession. Portfolio courses that are taught from a feminist liberatory pedagogy instill this core value into the learning process. The appreciation for diversity assisted participants in recognizing social work practice is about the client, not the worker or her/his ego.

5.4.1.4 Knowing it is the Client's Journey

Several participants spoke openly about their shift in perspective including an understanding that a social worker's goal is not to change the client, but to create the space for the client to change, to empower, rather than dictate.

Our focus has moved away from the grassroots of social work, and I think this brought me back to some of those grassroots and some of those ideas that we're just here to help people where they're at.

The change of perspective was in terms that my goal actually was not to influence people, that maybe previously I may have had a desire as a helper to help people towards right action, when in truth, helping was a lot more about just listening and honoring people and believing in them and helping them feel like they could make decisions in their own lives.

It's not about you the worker; it's about them the client. Clients are going to want to establish that relationship because, low and behold, you are involved in their life.

Hearing the stories of others and in constructing their own story, these practitioners were encouraged to see people as people and to join them in their unique journey where they are at. The portfolio experiences informed a practice model encompassing diversity, sensitivity, and empowerment of self and others.

5.4.2 Emotional Connectivity

Another theme in “what did you learn?” examines the emotional processes expressed by participants in reflecting back upon their portfolio experiences. This connectivity was still strong for many participants, who made significant connections with their personal and professional learning with others in the sharing of stories and the circle, through emotion rather than disengaged from it. All spoke of the emotional journey of portfolio, of coming to know who they are in the world and what they can offer.

5.4.2.1 Learning Through Emotion

The emotional connection to the learning manifested itself throughout the interviews. Emotional connectivity to learning and knowledge building implies that learning happens through emotion, rather than disconnected or disengaged from it. Feminist liberatory pedagogy supports the infusion of emotion into education. Connected learning means the head and the heart, reason and emotion, work together to create

meaningful integration of experience and knowledge. Study participants attested to the value of embedding learning in an interpretivist paradigm, creating meaningful connections between emotion and thought processes. At times, participants would become tearful while talking about their experiences, at others, just expressing a sense that no matter how much time had passed, if they were to get together with the same group of people support would be there.

There's so much to be said for other people's learning within a group. You can learn so much more and in such a shorter time period because you've got the emotion invested and involved, you've got the support of your peers. It's like you invest a lot emotionally in that too.

And I'm amazed the people that I went to school with, they stuck it out with me, they never threw me on the way-side. They stood right by me, even though I went through all that emotional turmoil.

I think that is extremely powerful, when you share that with a group of your peers that you trust, and you learn from them.

What is visible in this emotional connection is a sense of greater investment in the learning if both the head and the heart are engaged and committed. It is interesting to note this particular BSW program is not a cohort model where perhaps there would be a greater expectation of emotional connection after sharing experiences over two years. Rather, this particular program admits students yearly, so at any given time there are approximately half who are third year students and half who are fourth year students attending portfolio seminar. It means that each year, half of the students leave and the remaining half work with a new group of students. This implies it is not just length of time together creating a sense of emotional connection, but the process of sharing and mutually exploring and experiencing different ways of knowing.

One of the learning outcomes from engaging in the portfolio was a sense that

emotional connection was positive and important. Given the *'shield or guard'* these Aboriginal students used initially as they struggled with portfolio, the ability to form this connection to others was considered a significant experience in itself. This supports Liane Davis's (1985) contention of a female knowing that is connected and relational. Yet, it goes farther, for while Davis's contention was this type of learning was not happening in the academy, it is and it can, through tools such as the portfolio.

5.4.2.2 Finding Balance and Harmony

Throughout the learnings of portfolio is the idea of balance and harmony. All participants, whether they used the specific words balance, harmony, transformation, or healing discussed at length how engaging in the portfolios created opportunity to undertake a journey that led them to a place of balance in their personal and professional lives. This balance of personal and professional is reminiscent of an embracing of the core beliefs espoused by the Charitable Organization Societies and the idea of detached objectivity and the Settlement House Movement and the idea of the spirited advocate. To engage both these values speaks to an intricate connection between the personal and the professional in social work practice. Again, there was clear indication of an undeniable interconnection between personal and professional, of the adage 'you are your practice'.

How do you expect to have a healthy balance? You need to worry about your clients, you need to worry about your professional stuff, but you also need to worry about your personal self, because that personal self, that's who you are. You're not your profession, you're not anything else, you are who you are on the inside and you have to be that and you're not going to get validated from every person out in the world.

By this time, my spirit was so much stronger. By then, I don't know what happened, a transformation.

The spiritual self helped me develop my emotional development. I feel more connected to everything, even the world.

Really having those four directions in balance, I think that was a huge part, the balance part, and finding balance and being okay with balance.

Discernable in the learnings from the portfolio is a shift in participant's perspectives and an emotional connectivity leading to a sense of balance both within who they are and how they practice social work. The implication is if given the opportunity to learn through others and self there is opportunity to construct a different type of educational foundation for professional practice. This foundation creates a bridge between what has historically been conceived of as a schism or estrangement between social work education and practice. Critical feminist pedagogical tools, such as the portfolio, can serve to begin the construction of a bridge, of infusing the subjective into social work education and practice. This becomes apparent when participants discussed how they apply these different portfolio learnings to social work practice.

5.5 The Application: "How Do You Use It?"

Research participants gave clear examples of applying learnings through the portfolio journey into their workplaces with colleagues and clients as well as generally to the profession. What is most apparent is how the portfolio processes, and not discrete learning units, are brought forward into the community. As is evidenced in these themes, participants' extrapolations of learnings both directly and indirectly consistently inform their social work practice model. As one participant stated: *"because really that's what best practice is about, it's about knowing yourself and what you can handle and being able to offer that to people, and offering what you can handle."*

The basic social process evident in this stage is where participants listen, teach, and give back to their respective communities. Listening implies honoring the voice of other, by hearing the story and seeing strength and resilience. Teaching denotes a

confidence in ability to transmit knowledge as well as pride in sharing perceptions and understandings. While listening differently is also a theme in the application of portfolio experiences into their social work practice, it is also a process, for this type of listening is considered honoring to the community.

5.5.1 Using the Process

The research participants identified how the process of the portfolios taught them different ways of being with others, including clients and colleagues. Not only did discrete skills translate, in the form of things like listening differently, but also the process itself, particularly the use of the sharing circle and teaching others; becoming a part of their social work practice. Feminist pedagogy is congruent in modeling the values upon which the social work profession professes to rest. The processes occurring in this type of learning environment become useful in a variety of real world settings.

5.5.1.1 Taking the Circle Back to Colleagues and Clients

The learning acquired through being a part of a sharing circle led those interviewed to incorporate this form of communication into their social work practice with colleagues and clients. Perceived as a way of building trust, safety, and creating a sense of equality in importance, the circle becomes transposed into different practice situations.

I've introduced more people to sharing circles, I've really supported people to see the clients in a different light, and to be creative; be together as a community. When we have our unit meetings, it's interesting; we always sit in a circle. And a lot of times we share. I found being a new supervisor and them not being used to that so much, it's taken a little bit of time to develop that trust, just how it did in class. It's interesting because there's lots of times that mirror your life personally and professionally within the same block of time. This whole process of sitting around in a circle and being able to share those pieces I think is very, very helpful. And it helps us learn, it helps us be strong as a team.

I was thinking, we were in training last week in the 'U' shape and it just seemed odd. I think the circle is very powerful because even though we are all very different, we have a lot of similarities. We come in the circle and it's like we're on the same wave length. It's an okay place to say something and not be judged.

What is unambiguous in the interview statements is how the circle is a place to honor all people equally for their differences while simultaneously coming together for a similar purpose. Evidently, the process of learning, and not just discrete learning units such as specific theoretical constructs, can be helpful aids brought forward into different social work practice settings. This also implies educators need to attend to the process of the learning and not just focus on the content they want to instill onto students. Pedagogical methods need to be congruent to cultural experience. For the oppressed and marginalized in society, imposing of a generic euro and androcentric educational model further oppresses and silences. Pedagogical methods, such as feminist liberatory pedagogy, are congruent to a critical perspective where marginalized students can find voice and experience validation for their cultural teachings (Freire, 1985).

5.5.1.2 Listening Differently

One outcome of students' portfolio experiences is learning to listen differently and translating this into their social work practice. Many participants spoke of how listening differently allowed them to work differently as well, opening up space to be creative and flexible in their approach with others.

I find I listen to people differently. I listen to their stories more, but mostly with my colleagues, they're doing some reflection with whatever is going on with their clients. I recognize that and stop and listen.

I hear differently, I listen differently. I don't just hear the story of the problem or the issue, I hear their feelings, I hear how they feel or where they're frustrated, where they're stuck. I could hear feelings.

If I was going through four years of very centrally focused me, I need to get through this course so I can get my degree, I would have missed out on that

knowledge of other people's experiences and what they went through, all I would of known is what I had. And I wouldn't have been listening to other people. Now I think I'm an okay listener. How do you learn to listen if you're a talker and you don't listen to people? If you're not a good listener then where do you learn to listen?

Listening is an important component of social work practice in most settings, encouraging relationship building, information gathering (assessment), and goal setting. For the research participants, listening is one of the important applications of their learning through engaging with portfolio. Knowledge is acquired through experience and emotional connectivity, not disengaged from it. In a subjective paradigm, experience informs knowledge, adding contextualized understanding meaningfully applied in social work practice.

5.5.1.3 Teaching Others

All of the research participants have returned their learning to others in the form of teaching. The concept of teaching is noteworthy. It suggests confidence and clarity in knowledge and an ability to transmit this knowledge to others in the community. The transmission of knowledge may also be an indication these practitioners believe it significant enough to be deemed important for transmission. Teaching is particularly important to the four Aboriginal participants, who hold as a belief their responsibility in the transmission of cultural knowledge to others.

I supervise workers that would remove children quite easily not knowing really the impact that it had on the family. And I guess more so with Aboriginal people because the family is defined, it's the whole community. So I took that on, in helping other workers within my office; having myself explain or trying to teach in some way to them, that family's defined very differently within the Aboriginal communities.

And when I am doing cultural teachings, I always go back in time to remember what it was like when I first started taking the portfolio courses, remembering what it felt like to keep my head above water. And knowing that people who have

never experienced that would be feeling that same way, just gasping and trying to understand what was being said.

Teaching cultural knowledge is important in creating social work practice that is anti-oppressive and supportive of the diversity of contexts practitioners work in. The portfolio experiences provided opportunity to learn, to understand, and to carry this forward into teaching others, benefiting practitioners and the clients they serve.

5.5.2 Advocating

Advocacy is a skill social workers utilize in their practice settings. Research participants discussed how, through the integration of their learning in portfolios, they became stronger, more effective advocates at both the policy and client levels of practice. Advocacy is associated with the importance critical education places upon creating a learning environment where knowledge is connected to social responsibility. This responsibility is most closely associated with the intellectual history found in the Settlement House Movement where social workers were strong advocates for improving the conditions for the people they served. Including the Settlement House Movement alongside the traditions of the Charitable Organization Societies in social work education brings with it the possibility of making education relevant to practice. Advocacy is one manifestation of this social responsibility.

5.5.2.1 For Agency/Policy

The ability to recognize policies and agency practices that are not supportive and working toward changing them is one of the applications of portfolio learnings.

More insightful, and actually, with policy especially, you can push it sometimes to make it work for you and they're not so rigid. Just challenging myself and challenging policy. Really strongly advocating.

That's really what I got out of portfolio. I question, even now, why does it have to be this way? And thinking, well, if that's the way it's always been done, why can't we try it this way?

I think professionally, working with children's services, in an oppressive environment, a lot of oppressive things in my work environment, deciding what was within my control and what I can address, I did.

Participants found a voice to challenge policy and environments that were stifling to effective practice. Finding a voice was attributed to the shift in perspective and depth of self-reflection acquired during the portfolio process.

5.5.2.2. Seeing Strength and Resilience in Clients

Transcript analysis reveals an association between seeing clients as having strength and resilience and a resulting responsibility toward client advocacy. Participants shared how portfolio taught them to hear stories and to embrace diversity; ultimately respecting the journey of others in their context. This appreciation and non-judgmental perspective facilitates ease for practitioners in identifying situations where client advocacy is warranted.

I think it strengthens empathy, in terms of your day-to-day work with clients, it strengthens your sense of, acknowledging and embracing differences in other people. It's also the whole piece around peer relations and because you can transfer that so easily to client relations too.

I've seen a lot of people in my world that really, downtrodden and not always come out so good, things didn't happen for the good. And you have to honor their choices because it's their choices.

It just seems you're dealing with a lot of families that don't have their own natural support systems. Just looking at that whole important piece of, who does this family have here that's a natural support to them?

I work more closely with the client, these are all the things you need to do. How can we go about reaching each goal? I know you have these many days, but maybe we can extend your stay, and I would advocate strongly for them, because I remember feeling that way.

Working on behalf of clients to acquire the resources needed or to extend stay at a facility is a form of client advocacy and indication of how portfolio experiences inform social work practice. As one participant stated, the "*power difference is huge*" and it is important to use the power to the betterment of the people social workers serve rather than to pretend it is not there.

5.5.3 Authentic to Self

The original thematic model held this theme as genuine; however, feedback at the sharing circle shifted this to be authentic to self as more representative of acting with integrity, humility, pride, and honor towards self and others.

5.5.3.1 I'm No Expert

For the practitioners interviewed, it is important they remain humble in their approach to working with clients. A part of this was recognition it is not acceptable to pretend to be an expert on the lived experiences of others. To guide and to honor the choices and journey of the client is critical in their practice, reflecting the female voice of honoring narrative and contextualized knowing.

You know one of the things portfolio did for me was it made me human and humble and I could just be who I am and just be okay with that, I'm gonna be a social worker and I have a BSW, that arrogance that sometimes comes with an education, didn't need to be there. And I really appreciate that I could leave it behind.

I never go in thinking I am higher than them. I always explain to them that, I tell a story so this way when we're doing this journey together, I won't walk in front of you, I won't walk behind you, but I'll walk beside you.

It would have been easy to stay with a medical model, but then where do you go from that? Because if you're trying to work from a social work perspective and say, be client centered, you want to keep an even power keel, that they know more about themselves than you do not, look at me I have a degree.

Social work values support the ideas encapsulated by the research interviews of a client-driven practice model. Concepts like self-determination and inherent dignity and worth are language constructs the profession typically uses to denote working with clients (whenever possible) from within their own perspective and understandings. These values are reflective of a position where practice is client driven rather than determined by the social work practitioner. Values by their nature are inherently subjective. To place value in non-expertness and to translate this into practice implies research participants are finding ways to engender the subjective in their work with clients.

5.5.3.2 Walking the Walk

One of the elements of the theme authentic to self was sharing how self-reflection results in providing a better service to clients. Rather than maintaining a belief in the friendly visitor approach historically present in the Charitable Organization Societies, participants believed they cannot expect from others what they do not expect of themselves. This once again echoes the value of the subjective understandings similar to the Settlement House Movement living with clients in their communities. Subjectivity is inherently valued by research participants whereas objectivity becomes questioned. Examples given by participants included knowing different questions that may be useful in increasing client understanding of their circumstances and what is required for this to occur. Otherwise, as one participant stated: *“where do you go with someone when they’re trying to figure out something about themselves if you hadn’t had some clue of how to process things yourself?”* Participants perceived it would be impossible to ask insightful questions of clients without having asked these of themselves.

You can only take people as far as you've gone. I wouldn't be able to ask my client to go further than what I could because I don't know what further looks like.

I am able to go a little deeper with people because I'm confident in what I know because I put a lot of thought into it.

If I hadn't done that myself how could I expect, seriously, how could I expect to have any idea of what I was asking of my clients?

Everything I was learning I worked it through myself and it was like therapy. And in turn, when I sit with my clients, that's what I'm expecting them to do.

Authenticity implies not expecting more from a client than from the practitioner. It also implies a need to know oneself, looping back to the idea of having a solid foundation of person in the professional for effective practice. From the sharing circle following the preliminary data analysis, participants believed authenticity went beyond genuine. A worker is considered genuine in their desire to help others, but to be authentic means there is a sense of congruence between what is expected of self and what is expected of others.

While the application stage of the thematic model has the distinguishing themes of authenticity and applying the portfolio process, the application actually occurred throughout the portfolio experiences. It may not appear as a distinctive theme, but woven throughout the data analysis were a variety of threads of how the portfolio experiences inform the research participants' social work practice. These included: an increase in critical thinking skills, increase in empathy, increase in listening differently, increase in an open perspective, greater clarity in how self influences practice and practice models, clarity in what they know, acceptance of others for where they are in their journey, increase in understanding of Aboriginal peoples, increase in cultural pride. These are some of the perceptions of how participants believe the portfolio experiences inform their

daily practice. Infused throughout the process is a sense of the subjective. Subjective knowledge is utilized in practice to assist them as helping professionals. A final area that participants vehemently voiced as important to carry forward in the final analysis was in the arena of education.

5.6 Education: “We Want More Ghandis Don’t We?”

As previously discussed, research participants believed it important to separate education in the thematic model. Having experienced classical education, as one participant stated: “*I was trained that way from kindergarten to second year university*” and then to experience the feminist liberatory pedagogy using portfolios, participants held strong beliefs in the need for educators to shift their understanding of students, learning, and valuing of experiences. One participant was particularly clear in the need for education to embrace different ways of knowing:

I think everything in post-secondary education, somehow reflects working with people. I mean life is about working with people, being with people all the time and, there’s only a couple Ghandis in the world. But why can’t the education system try and create more Ghandis? Why are we stopping people from that? We’re not allowing people to get there.

Participants believed current education interferes with the self-actualization process and needs to shift to foster this type of growth in students.

5.6.1 Value Different Ways of Knowing

Participants discussed how education is about one way of knowing, a particular linear one, where theory is espoused as knowledge and students are relegated to a position of proving they have ‘it’ through formal examinations and papers that rarely change in substance. Marks, from their perspective, are awarded for best memorizing rather than application to real life. To value different ways of knowing would enrich the

educational experience and make for the possibility of more Ghandis and all that he represents.

5.6.1.1 Start Where the Student Is

According to the research participants, educators should start addressing the needs of the students, seeing them as individuals with different learning needs and styles.

We all know who some of these major theorists are, we all know the conventional ways, we all had to learn them, we all had to read about them, we all had to write papers on them, but really we need to learn how it goes for ourselves and how we're going to do that work or how this is going to represent our own personal selves. Because we are representing ourselves, plus the information and our experiences, when we work with people.

Educators should be trying to help people to find the way that they learn best, that gives them the greatest opportunity to demonstrate how they've been impacted, how they best can describe what it is you know. Not just tests, not regurgitation, we want people to believe that they can go out and learn and through whatever means that we learn all the time and it doesn't take somebody from higher up to tell you, this is what you need to read.

When you think about these structured classrooms, I think if we just thought about where they're at, it might certainly look a lot different.

Starting where the student is involves working from an epistemology where each learner is valued for his or her subjective insights. Prior knowledge and lived experiences become the commodity for learning. It implies an equal valuing of causal knowledge and knowledge from communication which Habermas (1971) believes is gained through self-reflection and interaction. Thus would begin the merging of both the objective and subjective positioning that has historically driven a wedge between social work education and practice.

5.6.1.2 We All Learn Differently

Participants shared their perception that one of the lessons they have taken from learning to value different ways of knowing is that each person, as a unique individual,

learns differently and this should be nurtured in post-secondary education.

Being Aboriginal, we express ourselves differently, we look at things differently, we have different experiences, and it gave me the opportunity to express myself differently, and that's really important. Especially with an adult learner that has been out of the school system and going back.

I learn more from experiences or hearing other people's experiences than I do from reading in a textbook. They need to also look at people's experiences, and not just look at academics. Anyone can go in and get straight 'A's you know, pump them out no problem. But can they handle the job? Are they ready to do the job?

Other people learn differently, not everybody learns the same. The struggle I have been just thinking about it is, what does it matter? What does it matter that other people learn differently when the academic world says no, it needs to be like this and if you can't pull that off, then what's the use? But there's value in other ways of knowing.

It's another form of expression and sometimes we don't honor different forms of expression, we honor one way and it's usually linear. We can make our own people healthier and happier, students like this form of expression. I think we would care about each other more in the world if we all just did it.

Although one participant shares a sense of frustration and perhaps even hopelessness that education will change, there is also a sense of a goal to work toward, one where different ways of learning are embraced and students are challenged to challenge themselves.

5.6.2 Challenge Yourself

Participants discussed a need for educators to be open to learning about themselves through others, for there to be a reciprocal process in the learning environment where they were also challenged to understand differently because of creating a climate where students are encouraged and supported in sharing their learning journey. The challenge yourself theme is also similar to the proverbial 'throwing down the gauntlet' as one participant challenges the educator to go through the experience herself/himself before discarding pedagogical tools like portfolio as not useful or

meaningless in the educational milieu, even daring them to then say it has no place. To sit in judgment of something not experienced is considered unfair and a closed perspective.

I think even as an educator if you gave your students more leeway to demonstrate their learning, you as an educator would learn something. Because you're just one person, so how would you know all the ways? No matter what you've read, in a class room with a whole bunch of people you deny yourself the learning you can get from your students. It needs to be much more a two way street.

One of the Aboriginal participants deconstructs the notion of what makes for a good teacher, using an Aboriginal cultural metaphor:

The best teacher sometimes is just listening to what people have to say, or even if people don't say anything, there's still something going on. I've learned over the years that the person who goes the farthest is the one who seems the quietest. It's a traditional value, because we were always taught to sit and listen. Because when you're hunting too, you going to sit quietly and listen to if animals are around on the move, because that's what animals do too. If I was to talk to them, I would tell them this.

The cultural difference from a Eurocentric model in what teaching is about is significant when applied to the positivist – interpretivist dialectic. Positivism is supported in the academy as indicated by the use of standardized testing instruments, lecterns distancing the expert from the learner, and the use of technological mediums such as transparencies and slide-shows illustrating facts, figures, and summaries. On the other end of the continuum is an interpretivist paradigm for education. This paradigm calls for knowledge that is contextually formed, values subjectivity in the knower, and perceives reality to be co-constructed and open to interpretation. A shift away from a Eurocentric model of teaching, embracing different cultural realities, would require a shift in paradigms where multiple methods and lens' to view the world are valued and given equal authority in the educational setting.

5.6.2.1 Value Experience

One element in education participants want to instill is for educators to value experience. Experience is a part of learning, a conduit for the integration of content, rather than something held in abeyance while theory is taught. Experience is the application of knowledge, a mechanism providing for possibility of bridging the education-practice schism. Education needs to be about real life, experience is real life.

The textbook stuff was interesting to read all that stuff, but that was all somebody else's reality. This was about my reality and the world how I saw it. It's a self-taught feeling. I think educators need to experience it.

If you have learning where you don't have the option, the opportunity to have a portfolio, it doesn't sink in. It really doesn't. The portfolio is where you get to the meat and bones of things.

The internalizing process, of integrating formal and informal knowledge systems, incorporating the totality of lived experience, personal, and professional understandings, is what participants believe social work education needs to encompass. Several stated they "couldn't imagine" what it would have been like to not complete portfolio as it was here where the integration between social work education and practice transpired.

5.6.3 Learning is Life-Long

There was indication in the analysis of interview transcripts that self-reflection skills developed in portfolio lead to a strong belief in learning as life-long. Like the need to continually reflect upon and alter practice, education, from the perspective of participants, needs to recognize and instill a thirst for life-long learning.

It must be very easy to make the blueprint without seeing if it really puts the person together. There's no process given to the person to keep testing themselves, or keep expanding their knowledge, or to see outside of themselves. Self-reflection promotes continual evaluation and learning as opposed to when you don't do it and come out with the idea that you're finished, that you know what it means now. Whereas self-reflection teaches you that it's not finished, that

it's a constant process, that it's a constant journey and that you always have to be examining what you're doing and re-evaluating and reflecting on what you're doing because you're changing as you learn, as you grow older, as your experiences increase you're going to change.

Learning is life-long is reflected throughout the different transcripts in terms of speaking to journeying through the medicine wheel, continuing on personal growth, continuing to reflect upon practice and their personal self in practice. For research participants, portfolio taught them that education is a journey, not a destination or end point. This being said, there are implications for educators adopting this type of epistemology. If a four-year degree was considered a part of life-long education including experience, how would curricula shift? How would educators work with students differently? If the goal was to develop a thirst for learning and knowledge that makes use of experience, how would classroom process shift?

The preceding sections presented a linear, one-dimensional thematic model for bringing the collective voice of the research participants forward. It afforded opportunity during the course of the data analysis to begin to construct an understanding of the collective voice emerging from the transcripts. From the process of the portfolio experience and the learning that occurred within it, to the application of both the process and learning to professional practice, there is clear indication of how meaningful portfolio was in the educational journey. The insistence by the sharing circle that education not just be a theme but rather a separate construct speaks of how, in contrast to previous educational experiences, participants place high value on this form of self-reflexive learning supported within a feminist pedagogical approach.

Adding three dimensionality as much as possible on a flat surface, the following section develops the metaphor for the model. It is the metaphor for the journey, adding

richness and depth to understanding how students experience portfolio and how they believe it informs their social work practice.

5.7 The Pinwheel Metaphor as Basic Social Process

The thematic model representing the collective story was presented to participants during the sharing circle where themes from the interviews were extrapolated. As the circle progressed, participants began to echo a need to represent the story in a manner consistent to portfolios. The symbolic representation, according to participants, needed to be three-dimensional because the portfolio journey is not static but multilayered and dynamic. The visual that was ultimately constructed by participants was of a double pinwheel. The outer, larger pinwheel represented the four emergent stages of the thematic model. The inner, smaller and more defined pinwheel represents the individual journey supported within the portfolio courses, also containing four arms.

It was important to Aboriginal participants that each pinwheel has four arms, as four is consistent with their understanding of teachings in their culture (four directions, four elements, four seasons, four areas in the medicine wheel). As participants had already stated a need to bring education out as a more significant construct, the story evolved into the four areas of processes, learnings, applications, and education. It logically followed this would be the four arms of the larger pinwheel supporting the individual journey. The medicine wheel (presented in its entirety in chapter four) completed the symbolic representation of the portfolio journey, honoring the individual voice within the collective. The double pinwheel was brought forward, with the internal smaller wheel containing the medicine wheel teachings. [Figure 5.1](#) presents an illustration of the pinwheel metaphor.

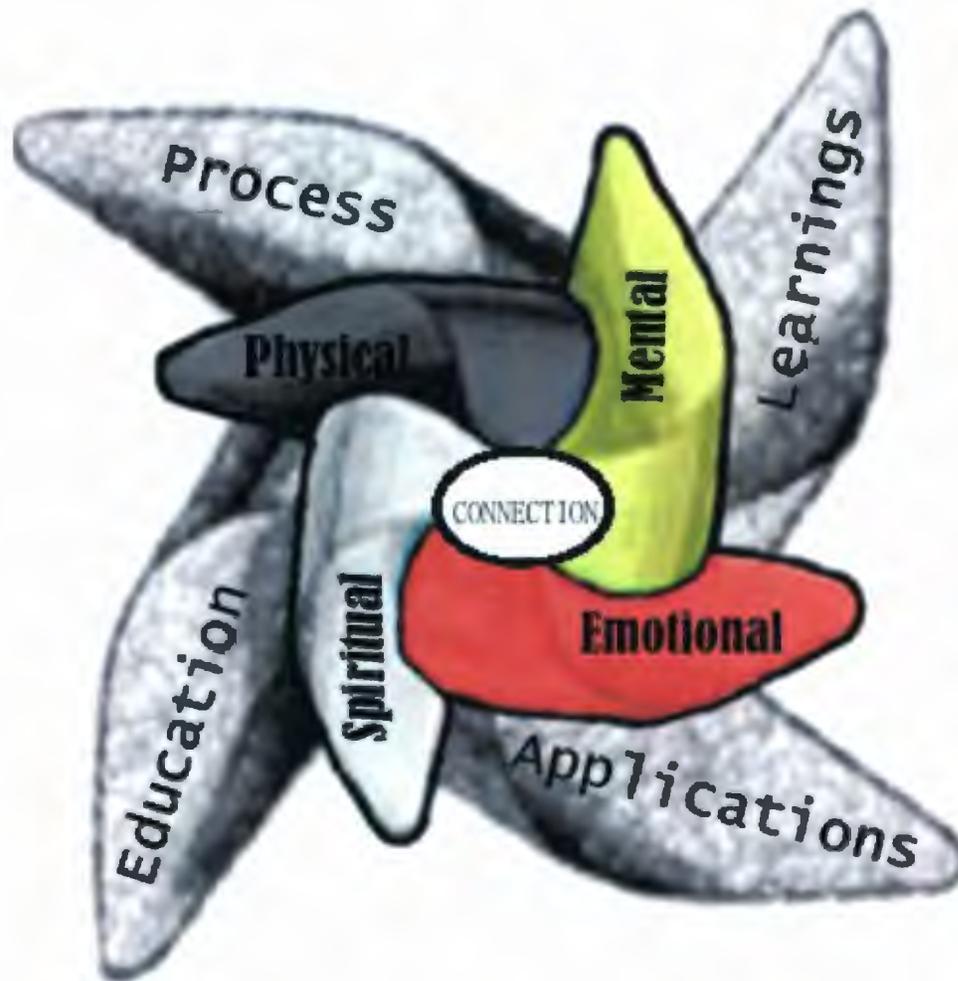


Figure 5.1 The Pinwheel Metaphor

The axis for the rotation of the two pinwheels is connection. Connection is essential for movement and keeps each pinwheel seeking balance. Connection for participants represents the reciprocal processes of sharing and listening. As sharing and listening occurred, they experienced emotional support and affirmation for their journey. An appreciation for difference and recognition of strength and resiliency in self and others transpired. They were perceiving people in a more understanding, empathic light in their personal and professional lives. The sharing circle at portfolio seminars facilitated the connection. Without connection, there would be no pinwheel. The larger pinwheel represents the portfolio processes of the collective voice. While it is larger, it is paler from the center, supporting the individual journey yet not overshadowing it. The four arms of the larger pinwheel reflect participants' experiences with portfolio (the thematic model). There are always pieces of the arms that are visible or on the surface to outside observers and pieces that are not, representing the depth that occurs through the process. The arms do not function discretely. Each is dependent upon the other for movement in seeking balance in the pinwheels. If one of the arms becomes unraveled, the others are discordant.

The smaller pinwheel is the medicine wheel representing the individual journey of engaging in the portfolios. It is smaller than the larger pinwheel that supports it, yet informs, and is informed by it. If colored, each arm would be those of the medicine wheel: black, red, yellow, and white, representing the diversity of humanity that emerged as one of the teachings through the portfolios (the four colors are symbolic of the four races in the world and are used by some Aboriginal peoples). Other colors for the medicine wheel can be employed, dependent upon Aboriginal cultural interpretation.

Black is often replaced with blue or green. The four colors selected here are a modern interpretation of the medicine wheel teachings, a post-colonial interpretation of the wheel. These colors representing the different races of the world are representative of the concepts of difference and diversity that emerged through data analysis, considered congruent to what the participants shared in the interviews and sharing circle.

The medicine wheel teachings fit with a pinwheel metaphor. All other quadrants become impacted, putting the wheel out of balance when one quadrant of the medicine wheel is ill. Both the pinwheel metaphor and medicine wheel teachings speak to vulnerability. With the correct amount of negative energy, for example, a strong wind blowing against the pinwheel or in the case of the medicine wheel perhaps many deaths in a family, balance is lost and there is risk of one arm unfurling or the wheel becoming in shadow.

The sharing circle also discussed the concept of force, where air represents the energy going in and coming out of the double pinwheel. This energy can be thoughts, emotions, experiences, or new knowledge acquired. The force is heavy, challenging at first but providing momentum for movement. As the pinwheel spins, the colors begin to transform, blending and merging rather than being discretely identifiable. As there is always energy in life, negative or positive, the pinwheel is always in motion, seeking balance on its axis. The balance is never achieved for long periods, as people have different experiences and over time their knowledge and understandings change, so too does the movement and even the texture of the pinwheel. This is symbolic of life long learning as different paths are taken and different choices made.

The double pinwheel is a visual metaphor symbolic of how students experience the portfolio and how they believe it informs their social work practice. Each arm of the pinwheel embeds into the other; there is a sense of interdependence. The ability for one or both to rotate at different speeds and directions with differential energy is indicative of the complexity of how the subjective is engendered in social work practice. The axis of the double pinwheel is connection – to self and to others, valuing relationship and a connected knowing reminiscent of Davis's (1985) heuristic of the female voice in social work practice. From the perspective of participants, educators can and should be a positive force in their learning journey, supporting learning processes conducive to multiple ways of knowing and coming to know.

5.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the results of the data analysis from the nine participant interviews exploring student experiences of portfolio and how they believe it informs their practice. The objectivity/subjectivity dialectic is evident throughout the analysis as participants shifted their understanding of how learning occurs and the value of experience and emotional connection in the learning process. This dialectic was particularly prevalent for Aboriginal participants who expressed the portfolio courses as providing them with the first opportunity in post-secondary education to experience a learning that was congruent to their culture rather than the imposition of the Eurocentric model typified in the positivist paradigm evident in classical education.

There is indication in the data analysis supporting the post-modernist assertion of multiple realities and the importance of people authoring their own stories in their unique contexts. Critical social work education embedded in pedagogical methods such as

feminist liberatory pedagogy gave participants the freedom to learn differently. For participants this freedom supported a process of healing, liberation, and transformation, embracing individual experience and knowledge systems. This congruence between content and process in education models social work professional values affords recognition of the historical legacies left by both the Settlement House Movement and the Charitable Organization Societies. These legacies are represented in the participants' emphasis on self-reflection, honoring the person in the professional, and of nurturing the subjective and objective knowledge systems in social work education and practice.

Feminist liberatory pedagogy used to teach portfolios supports the basic tenets of an interpretivist paradigm. Data analysis indicates support for Freire's (1970) process of conscientisation, as participants spoke of the healing, liberation, freedom, and transformation that occurred through engaging in the portfolio process. As a result, participants were able to clarify their own positionality, incorporating a practice model that integrates ideas of praxis and reflexivity. Participants believe education needs to shift to incorporate the subjective, bridging the historical schism between social work education and practice. Educators can nurture different ways of knowing and be congruent in their pedagogical practices and the content instilled in the learning environment. The next chapter discusses implications arising from the data analysis.

Chapter Six

Implications and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study's intent was to explore how pedagogical tools can be used to assist undergraduate students in engendering the subjective in social work practice. The analysis of the nine interviews supports this supposition. Findings indicate research participants were infusing subjective understanding acquired through their portfolio experiences into their social work practice in a variety of ways. Through exploration of learning processes (how did you learn) and learning outcomes (what did you learn) participants were able to provide clear examples of how the process and content of the portfolio journey applied in their practice. They also provide a clear message to educators of a need to shift the focus in social work education. For each of these areas, conclusions can be drawn as well as implications for education. Social work education can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between education and practice, making education meaningful in practice. As Schön (1987) states,

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is the high, hard ground overlooking the swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals of society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of great human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he[sic] remain on the high ground where he[sic] can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards or rigor, or shall he[sic] descend into the swamp of important problems and non-rigorous inquiry? (Schön, 1987, p.1)

The problem is the schism between social work education and practice. The challenge is for social work education to descend into the 'swamp', to bring value back

into the academy, creating new and different ideas about curriculum, pedagogy, and epistemology. It is time to bring the marginalized voice to the centre and create meaningful discourse to address the paradoxical position of social work practice and education. This chapter discusses the implications evolving from the collective stories of the research participants, social work practitioners practicing in the 'swampy lowlands'.

No conclusions can be drawn about other social work student experiences or of student experiences completing portfolio courses in a different setting with a different instructor. Any implications or conclusions drawn from this study are tentative, representing the voices of the nine participants interviewed. While the limitations of the study, including possible effects of having the instructor of portfolios as the researcher (hence the possibility only those who had positive experiences came forward to be interviewed) are apparent, it adds further richness to the practice-education discourse.

A critical theoretical approach to education using the feminist liberatory pedagogy of this study dictates the importance of bringing the voice of students to the foreground of the discourse. For research participants, the experience of completing portfolios was liberation, a healing and transformative journey. The importance of voice was particularly prevalent for Aboriginal participants, who felt silenced in the educational environment and who were able to find voice through the portfolio journey.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back", that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to - subject - the liberated voice. (hooks, 1989, p.9)

The capacity for liberatory learning in social work education is significant. It is learning that supports the core values espoused in the social work profession and has the ability to

meet the challenge of bridging the education-practice schism.

6.2 Summary of Findings

Portfolio courses delivered from within a feminist liberatory pedagogical framework support a process of conscientisation similar to Freire's (1970) description in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Participants express learning about themselves and about others through participation in sharing circles. The sharing circles provide the foundation for the community of care and connection evolving from the portfolio courses. This learning process was most supportive of the individual journey through the medicine wheel teachings, where participants chose to explore their personal selves in relation to professional practice. This learning process of the circle and stories became translated into social work practice. Participants discussed areas in practice where they employed the principles of the sharing circle, listening differently, and supporting clients and colleagues in telling their story, promoting growth and understanding.

The individual journey witnessed the development of self-reflective skills. Self-reflection is perceived as critical to engaging in effective social work practice and in the achievement and maintenance of balance and harmony in their personal and professional lives. Self-reflection also provides students with opportunity to explore their own positionality in relation to others, significant in client-centered social work practice models. Self-reflection becomes infused in engendering the subjective in social work practice, where participants were clear in articulation of their triggers, recognizing resilience and strength in clients, and in understanding different contexts.

The interview analysis also revealed a shifting in perspective among research participants. Portfolios encouraged them to be open to change and difference, to

recognize the impact of self on their practice, and to develop confidence in their abilities. In contrast to prior educational experience was the emotional connectivity to learning experienced through the portfolio journey as students determined the learning process, content, and outcome. The shift in perspective also included an attitude of humility and non-expertness, to guide rather than lead clients on their personal journeys. Authenticity was the core of this conceptualization of humility.

Research participants also convey a clear message to educators - change is required. This change would embrace different ways of knowing, recognition, and value in experience and prior knowledge. Like social work practice, where practitioners start where the client is, participants want educators to start where the student is. The message is clear, education is a life-long journey, and with the development of self-reflection skills in social work educational settings, the continual learning that is necessary to be ethical and effective in practice can transpire.

This study's findings indicate practitioners do engender the subjective in social work practice and pedagogical tools can support this process. Through congruence between what educators teach and the teaching processes used to transmit the content, the subjective can be infused into the educational environment, creating a bridge between social work education and practice.

6.3 Implications

The implications discussed in the following sections focus upon the responsibilities of education in bridging the education-practice schism. The study focused upon a particular educational experience, that of the self-reflexive portfolio and has as its presupposition that education needs to embrace the interpretivist paradigm as equal in

value and voice to that of the positivist paradigm that has been prevalent in education. To only acknowledge the formal labeled knowledge products of rational and scientific study is to participate in Western empiricism and perpetuate the silencing of the voice of 'other' (Smith, 2001; Harding, 1986). The implications speak from the voice of 'other', the female voice of the academy articulated by Davis (1985). The implications also speak to a method to bridge the longstanding gap between COS and SHM, to bring feminist liberatory pedagogy into mainstream social work education, and to give a place in social work education to post-modern thought, an abstract philosophical school that is often cited but which is often seen as irrelevant in the practice of pedagogy.

6.3.1 Teaching as Reciprocal Opportunity

The schism between social work education and practice is fuelled by a conceptualization of teaching as a process whereby the teacher, as holder of 'expert' knowledge is the purveyor of knowledge to the students. While this banking model of education has had its critics over the past century (Dewey, 1938; Schön, 1987; Freire, 1970) it is entrenched in the university setting. Through an emphasis on research and scholarship, universities perpetuate a conceptualization of the teacher as expert. This places social work in a paradoxical position. Social work education is situated in the university setting, but practice occurs in the real world of relationships and the complexity of human contexts.

One of the implications arising from this research supporting the engendering of the subjective in education is a need to re-conceptualize what teaching is. The data analysis in this study revealed teaching as reciprocal opportunity. The language choice of reciprocal denotes the emphasis on connection and community of learners, inclusive of

the teacher. Reciprocity also implies a more equitable distribution of power between the students and the teacher. This includes a mutual sharing of responsibility for the context in which learning occurs, such as safety and trust. This is congruent with a feminist liberatory pedagogical framework where all people are experts in their own lives. This pedagogical positioning is also congruent with honoring different cultural systems. The notion of reciprocity also fits well with participants' articulation of the portfolio learning environment as a 'give and take' process where stories are shared, heard, and honored. This would mean teachers shifting their epistemological understanding to incorporate the valuing of subjective experiences in a classroom setting. Both teacher and student experiences and knowledge systems become valuable learning tools.

While reciprocity represents connection and community, the construct of opportunity represents an opening for possibilities. The possibilities to guide and be guided; to listen and be heard; to create space to develop new understandings and perspectives; to develop personal confidence and a professional self. This requires a conceptualization of teaching as a responsibility to create conditions conducive to students acquiring personal, social, and political awareness within the social work profession. This shifts an understanding of teaching away from a positivist position of teaching as purveying logical, rational knowledge to an interpretivist position of teaching as embracing multiple ways of knowing. Teaching as reciprocal opportunity opens possibilities for new ways of interaction between teacher and student, valuing of different knowledge systems, and creation of a climate encouraging personal and professional development.

6.3.2 Supporting the Female Voice

The participants explicitly held connection as central to their learning. This supports Davis' (1985) contention that the application of a female way of knowing in education can enhance student acquisition of the knowledge and skills required in social work practice. Statistics support the need for the contextual and narrative thinking of the female voice in academia. While the vast majority of social workers are female and social work clients also female, the majority of social work academics in faculties across Canada are male, particularly in the professorial ranks (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2006; Hick, 2006). This supports Davis' (1985) assertion that the male voice traditionally supporting the positivist paradigm represses the female voice. This study re-asserts the need for the female voice to have equal representation in education. The female voice values relational connection and is infused with an ethic of care (Larabee, 1993).

Study participants affirmed how the ethic of care present throughout the portfolio process became integrated into their social work practice. This upholds the core values of the social work profession, lending greater congruence between what educators teach and how they teach it. Again, this would require a shift in the purpose and goals of social work education toward a holistic model nurturing the person in the professional. It places value in both the historical traditions of the Settlement House Movement and Charitable Organization Societies, which serve as the foundation and intellectual tradition for the profession.

If teaching is a reciprocal opportunity and speaks from a female voice, there would be greater congruence between social work education and practice lessening the

current rift, blending social work as science and art. Pedagogical tools such as the self-reflexive portfolio provide educators with tangible methods of infusing the subjective into education.

6.3.3 Linking Process and Product

The research findings support the need for congruence between what is taught and how it is taught. The product is a representation of both the goal of the student's learning over the term as well as the achievement of this learning. The process of working toward the goal embeds the student into a subjective process and creates the possibility for different learning to occur. This shift in standpoint from objectivism to subjectivism engages the student in a creative process transcending oral or written literacy. Different dimensions of self emerge and become valuable assets in the learning environment. For example, all four Aboriginal research participants spoke to how for the first time, they perceived themselves as competent learners and as valuable class members. From their perspective, conventional formal examination processes and written academic papers did not allow strength to emerge, but rather reinforced doubt in their abilities. This shift from a deficit to a strength-based perspective is supportive of social work values and the need to embrace multiple ways of knowing.

The linkage of the portfolio process to the portfolio product models praxis, a dialectic of reciprocity between the internal self (knowledge, experience, understandings) and the external representation of self (the artifacts). Engaging in a group process around the process and product, or artifact, allows peers to experience one another differently; to value and embrace difference in experience, knowledge, and culture. It creates an environment for peers to experience a model of group supervision, collegial support, and

a communal work setting that starkly contrasts with competitive, individualistic driven settings.

The portfolio process and portfolio product interact to create a learning environment congruent to the values of the social work profession. The variety of representation of knowledge, skills, and experiences independent of written words or numeric symbols encourages students to engage in a subjective process that embodies the basic elements of praxis. The product and the process each model different ways of learning and knowing, creating congruence between what is taught and how it is taught. The destination, embodying the portfolio product and group processes, facilitates a journey of meaningful interaction with others and the recognition in the importance of self and other. Social work education needs to continue to model congruence between what is taught in education and what is practiced in the field.

6.3.4 Bringing the Student Voice Forward

This study brought the student voice forward into the education practice discourse. This student voice communicated several messages; one is the need for time to process learning. Students are able to create learning outcomes tailored to their learning style, which may include longer periods of time in which to integrate material into their already existing foundational knowledge and experience. The end result to having time is knowledge that becomes readily applicable to their social work practice.

Second, educational processes of how educators teach must be congruent with how social workers expect to practice. If educators expect social work practitioners to treat clients with respect, dignity, the right to self-determination, and uphold a client-centered practice model, then the transmission of these teachings need to be congruent

with this message. Study participants communicated it was the congruence between what was taught and how it was taught that is useful in their social work practice. This included embracing diversity, hearing resilience and strength, listening differently, and reaching for the client's story. These portfolio experiences then inform practice knowledge, which is a formative learning journey. This is consistent with praxis and Schön's (1983, 1987) writings on the value of the reflective practitioner.

All study participants articulated the need for educators to embrace, support, and teach to different ways of knowing. This includes teaching to both the female subjective and male objective voices and across different cultures, ages, experiences, and perspectives. Given the impossibility of one person being an 'expert' in all these areas, a post-modernist lens to an understanding of what education is encourages the use of all voices in the classroom. This co-construction of knowledge elucidated by Lather (1984), hooks (1994), and others speaking from this paradigm is supportive of the development of a social work education model that can bridge the gap between academia and practice. Different ways of knowing provide opportunity for social work practitioners to work with a multitude of different client systems in the complexity of the global world.

6.3.5 Future of Social Work Education

The well-documented schism between social work education and practice and the conclusions drawn from this study exploring student experiences with portfolio and how they believe it informs their practice means there are implications for the future of social work education. This study supports the call for a renewed investment in the historical embrace of both the subjective prevalent in the Settlement House Movement and the objective represented by the Charity Organization Societies. Just as knowledge can

inform experience, so too can experience inform knowledge. To create balance between the female and male voices in the academy, the voice of the subjective needs to be brought into social work educational settings. To be congruent with social work professional values implies educators working with the strength and resilience present in each student and his/her story. The classical banking model of education stressing the deficits or what the student does not have is not congruent with these values. No template where one size fits all is a viable or realistic application in social work education or practice. Any template risks silencing many voices and runs the risk of only hearing the few who fit a Eurocentric, positivist perspective. For social work education to become more relevant and meaningful to social work practice in the future, this would entail embracing multiple ways of knowing, inclusive of both the subjective and the objective.

This exploratory study puts forth one tangible way educators can teach to multiple ways of knowing. The use of feminist liberatory pedagogical approaches to curriculum development and delivery is within the scope of an educator's responsibility to build an understanding of learning as lifelong rather than a discrete destination. Just as it is expected of practitioners, so too is it an expectation of educators to uphold the professional values, standards, and ethics of the social work profession. Embedding the subjective equally alongside the objective in social work education provides reciprocal opportunity for education and practice to build a foundational understanding between what is taught and how it is to be taught. One need not dictate to the other but, like the principles of the sharing circle, they can have equal voice and influence in a vision for practice. If social work is based on natural helping as well as technique, then there needs to be a place for both of these perspectives in education. Infusing the subjective into the

already existent objectivity prevalent in the academy envisions social work practice as a personal journey embedded in professional development, not discrete or separate from it. There is a place for both formative and summative learning, congruence between what educators think students need to learn and the perceptions of what students think they need to learn. The future of social work education where education is meaningful and relevant to practice dictates a move beyond discourse to action. The use of feminist liberatory pedagogy is one action that can assist in the alignment of social work education to practice.

6.3.6 Recommendations for Future Research

This study exploring student experiences with self-reflexive portfolios and how they believe it informs their practice demonstrates the creative possibilities that can be utilized to engender the subjective in education. It does not suggest a replacement of the positivist paradigm that would require a complete realignment of post-secondary education but instead suggests an inclusionary educational approach where both the subjective and objective interplay to create a holistic approach for teaching for social work practice.

Future research endeavours need to continue to bring the student voice forward into the education-practice debate, to create meaningful dialogue where practitioners in the field inform educators in the academy. More research is required exploring specific pedagogical approaches of embedding the subjective in education. Different cultural understandings about learning and teaching need to be explored to make education meaningful and relevant to the cultural diversity in Canadian society. Research projects that focus on teaching processes and an investment in how teachers teach need to be

evident in the university setting. Emancipatory projects investigating the learning experience and not just discrete outcomes can enhance faculty capacity to meet the needs of students and social work practitioners in practice. Future research supporting the bridging of education and practice in social work will ensure a solid foundation for the social work profession in the twenty-first century.

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Appendix A: Letter to Participate

If you decide to participate in the research prior to the first interview and sharing circle I will ask you to sign a consent form indicating you have given permission to participate in the research study. The consent form will be kept in a file separate from the study results in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

You will also be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire that asks basic information about you, such as gender, age, culture, and social work practice position. The information you give will be grouped with the other participants and therefore will not reveal your identity.

As a participant, you will be asked to share your experiences and understandings of the self-reflexive portfolios in an individual interview. You will also be asked to share your views on how these portfolios impact your social work practice. The interview will be digitally recorded and will take two hours to complete. The digital recording will be transcribed by an individual who has taken an oath of confidentiality and any individual identifying information will be removed prior to any publication. The recording and the written transcription will be kept in a secure location only accessible to the researcher. Following completion of all interviews, I will complete a beginning analysis of themes from the interviews. A sharing circle lasting two hours will then be held with all participants to review and expand upon the themes from the interviews. No individual will be identified in the doctoral dissertation or any publications or presentations that may result from the study.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decide to withdraw from participating in the study at any time without penalty. If you have any questions, you may contact the researcher, Gail Zuk at 1-780-539-2964 / 1-780-512-0985 or gzuk@gprc.ab.ca or the research supervisor, Dr. Ross Klein at 1-709-737-8160 or rklein@mun.ca.

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 1-709-737-8368.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Research Project Title: Honoring the subjective: An exploration of the self-reflexive portfolio in social work education.

Researcher: Gail Zuk, MSW, RSW, PhD student – Faculty of Social Work, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

I have read the participant letter and I am aware of the nature of this study. My signature on this form indicates I am willing to participate in the study.

I have received explanation about the nature of the study and its purpose. I understand the following:

1. I may contact the researcher, Gail Zuk at 1-780-539-2964 / 1-780-512-0985 or gzuk@gprc.ab.ca or the Research supervisor, Dr. Ross Klein at 1-709-737-8160 or rklein@mun.ca with any concerns about this research.

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If I have ethical concerns about this research (such as the way I have been treated or my rights as a participant), I may contact the Chair of the ICHER, at 1-709-737-8368 or icher@mun.ca.

2. I understand I will be interviewed privately and participate in a sharing circle.
3. The interview will be electronically recorded.
4. The interview will be professionally transcribed.
5. The electronic recording will be stored in a computer program which will be password protected. Electronic storage will be erased after seven years.
6. Transcripts will remain with Gail Zuk and stored securely in a locked office. Transcripts will be shredded after seven years.
7. The data provided by me will remain confidential and I will remain anonymous in the dissertation, presentations, and publications.
8. I can withdraw from the study at any time and have my data withdrawn.
9. There is no apparent danger of physical or psychological harm.
10. I will have the opportunity to read the dissertation once it is completed.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Demographic Information

Please provide the following information, which will be used for descriptive purposes only.

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Post-Secondary Education: _____

Year completed: _____

Culture (please self-identify your culture):

Current social work position and with what agency:

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Introduction

Obtain Consent

Give guidelines for how interview will be conducted (i.e., will be recorded, may ask to stop at any time, may ask to repeat information, may refuse to answer question etc)

Prompt questions:

1. Would you share what it was like for you to complete the portfolio courses?
 - What was each portfolio about?
 - How did it connect to your lived experience?
 - How did it connect to your classroom learning?
2. What meaning did the portfolios have for you?
 - How did you make each portfolio fit with where you were at in terms of experience and thought processes?
 - How was the experience self-directed?
3. Using one of your portfolio experiences to help me understand your journey, would you walk me through the process from the beginning to the end?
 - How did you first decide on what you were going to do?
 - What factors influenced this decision?
 - What was the process like of completing the various portfolio courses?
4. What has been your major learning/wisdom gained from engaging in the portfolio courses?
 - What did you walk away from the portfolio knowing about yourself?
 - How do you now take and apply what you learned in your social work practice?
 - Do you think about or experience yourself or others differently as a result of the portfolio experience?
5. How do you think your experiences with portfolios inform your social work practice?
 - In what ways are the portfolio experiences brought into your social work practice?
 - Are there any particular things about portfolio that informs your social work practice?
 - Are there any particular experiences in practice that informed portfolio?
6. How do you imagine your practice would be different had you not had the portfolio courses?
 - Do you think you would have been better able to practice social work without these experiences? Please explain.
 - Do you think you needed these portfolio experiences to do what you do today?
7. If you were to sit down with educators, what would you like to tell them about portfolios?
 - Do you think educators need to bring student experiences into the classroom more? How so?
 - How do you believe educators can do a better job with making education relevant to social work practice?

Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the interview?

Complete demographic questionnaire with participant.

Thank participant for the interview.



