Spiritual Mapping as a Contemplative Practice:
Crafting Direction towards Service

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Abstract

Maps are representations that situate us – how selected human and physical features are located, arranged, distributed, and related to one another – and can assist us in finding our way. A good map should tell you what it is about, which direction North is, when the map was made or updated, and who made the map. This poster will describe a contemplative session used in a graduate class to facilitate a transition for students entering year 2, where the focus is on co-creating projects that serve individuals in human systems. Using a combination of loving-kindness meditation, arts-based mapping (both individual and collective), and deep listening and dialogue, a space was created for this cohort to let go of past conflicts, explore and identify common goals of service to others, inquire into points of disjuncture, and find ways to move forward as a collective.

## Participants and the Program Structure

Eleven MA students in the Human Systems Intervention program (HSI) participated in a contemplative session during their final weekend together. HSI is the design and implementation of interventions in social settings where adults are confronted with the need to change their perspectives, attitudes, and actions. It is inclusive of leadership, management, and organizational and community development, and includes many other theoretical and methodological approaches to creating healthier social systems.

This program operates as a cohort system. Cohorts are groups of students who begin and complete a course of study together over a specified period, remaining intact, and proceeding together through a series of courses and developmental experiences in the context of that program (Maher, 2005). Cohort-based programs aim to create "thought collectives" (John-Steiner, 2000), characterized by multisubjectivity, multivocality, deep dialogue, toleration of uncertainty, and open inquiry. Cohort learning also tends to result in sustained interaction among members over the lifetime of their professional careers. This classroom structure creates the optimal Vygotskian authentic learning conditions that address the cognition of the whole person and satisfy students' need for affiliation in educational contexts. Members take emotional and intellectual risks to construct mutuality, productive interdependence, and jointly negotiated outcomes. This structure also privileges relationship learning as an emotional experience since, "Without emotional attachment to significant others, learning would be difficult if not impossible" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 151).

But they can have pitfalls and become spaces of negativity between students or between students and faculty (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). Students report that they or classmates were excluded, "boxed into" predictive and restrictive roles or trapped in unpleasant relationships (Teitel, 1997); or that students experienced intense discomfort and irreconcilable conflict early in the life of the cohort (Maher, 2005).

Purpose

The pedagogical purpose of this session was to allow the cohort to release any built-up negativity, and identify common goals of service which are necessary for the successful navigation of educational tasks ahead of them in year 2.
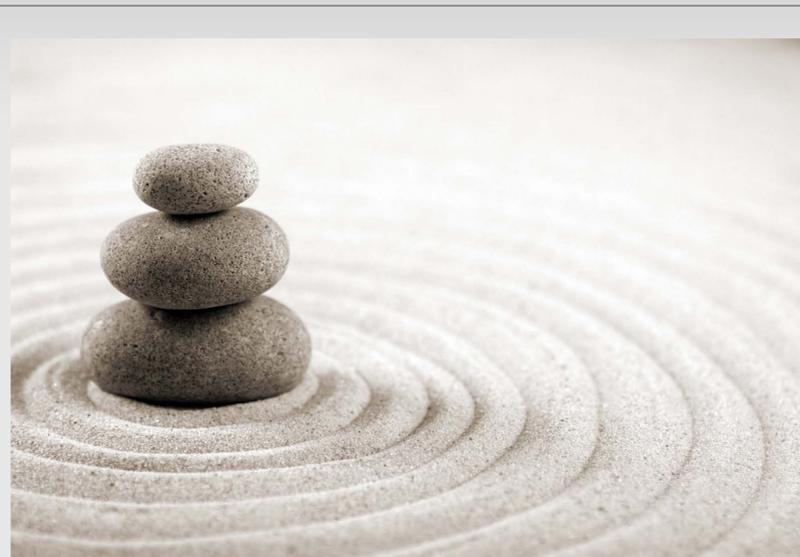
Process

1. After introducing the flow of the session, I led the class in a loving-kindness meditation (Barbezat & Bush, 2014) to cultivate an inclusive unconditional feeling of acceptance towards self and others. This is a meditation of "care, concern, tenderness, loving-kindness, friendship– a feeling of warmth…" (p. 178). This was accompanied by music (https://soundcloud.com/keyofgeeb3/7-moons-reiki-meditation-music).
2. After the meditation, they were asked to identify a goal of service that they would like to realize within the next year– something that would trigger liberation and transformation for others. After writing this down, they were asked to identify some steps, actions, and practices they would need to embody in order to make this happen.
3. They were then given art materials to translate this into a personal map of what they would need to do in order to reach this goal.
4. The class then broke up into triads, and shared their maps, noting commonalities and differences. They did this in two rounds with different cohort members.
5. The students then engaged in a group discussion about the cohort's ultimate goal of service and how the cohort can become a space for supporting these individual and collective journeys.
6. They then created a collective map mural that would serve to orient them in the year ahead. The session closed with a group reflection of what was alive for them in the moment.

Observations and Feedback

1. The students struggled, as they did the entire year, to form a collective sense of purpose.
2. They had difficulty coming to grips with the fact that they were not ready.
3. However, creating an explicit conversation about this brought it to the conscious awareness of the students. Afterwards, several students reported being more conscious of building service goals into their practice. Creating a dialogue (or trying to) was an important way to surface issues to be addressed in some explicit and constructive way.

1. Art making can create anxiety in some students, even with a foundation built throughout the course of a year. It can be emotionally challenging.
2. The notion and language of *being in service* is now part of the cohort's functioning, but it is less clear how deep this is. They do discuss purpose more frequently and are dedicated to give meaning to what they do.

References

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