Academic Co-creative Inquiry: Creating Inclusive Processes for Learning

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Abstract This paper focuses on an innovative way of teaching and learning inspired by cooperative inquiry. Cooperative inquiry is usually used as an empowering research methodology for participatory transformation and is deeply engaged with the human condition. This paper reports on its modification within a hierarchical tertiary education setting through a process named 'Academic Co-creative Inquiry' where teachers and students through a collaborative process co-create the context and the content for the course and mutually assess its effectiveness. The focus of this study is a Spirituality and Social Practice course within a Masters of Social Practice programme at Unitec, New Zealand. A co-creative inquiry of this kind resulted in a very high engagement of students, remarkably positive feedback about the course, very high standard of assignments and an increased collaboration between students. Peer and self-assessment, especially peer assessment from practitioners in the area of students' practice, contributed to integration of theory, practice and experience and proved to be useful not only for students but for peer assessors as well. Students reported about personal integrity that developed during this process and emphasised the importance of the context of inclusiveness that was co-created where all voices were heard and where a range of alternative views were appreciated and explored for the purpose of learning about respecting difference. A summary of findings from this unusual and truly collaborative, student centred, inclusive and inquiry based approach is presented and critically analysed.

Key Ideas

- Co-creative inquiry learning engenders competent practitioners who act with integrity.
- Personalisation of prescribed learning outcomes helps in development of a context where students show greater honesty and openness about their goals and beliefs, enables all voices to be heard and all students to be included in the inquiry process regardless of their background and beliefs.
- Self and peer assessment increases quality of student assignments.

Discussion Question 1 How to further develop the method and make it suitable for a range of professional fields?

Discussion Question 2 How to modify this inclusive approach to be suitable for large classes?

Introduction

Academic Co-creative Inquiry as a method of advanced teaching and learning was developed over three years and evolved through critical reflection, appreciative inquiry and peer feedback received when presented at Interuniversity Centre in

[1] With contributions from 34 Masters of Social Practice students who participated in the inquiry process in three different classes from 2006 – 2009.

Dubrovnik in 2007 and then in its developed form at 4th Asia Pacific Conference on Educational Integrity in Wollongong in 2009. This happened concurrently while the method has been co-created with course participants and modified on the basis of students' continuous feedback. Furthermore, the method itself was re-named through a co-creative dialogue between John Heron and me to *Academic Co-creative Inquiry*. This name captures its essence better and clearly distinguishes it from the term co-operative inquiry which inspired its creation.

The focus of this paper is a Masters of Social Practice course called Spirituality and Social Practice. My students are social workers, community developers, counsellors or other social practitioners. They all have a good grounding in their primary discipline and they come to our programme to expand their knowledge, to explore social practice issues in more depth, or simply to get a masters degree which will give them more power, influence or freedom in their profession. They are coming from a range of backgrounds, various cultures, beliefs, ages, sexual orientations and expectations of what studying on a masters level may mean.

I encountered cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996) as a research method when I was searching for a way of doing research with people rather than on people. When reading about various cooperative inquiry projects and participating in some, I soon realised that it is a perfect method for teaching and learning as insights were fast, authentic, determined by participants, relevant for their professional practice and in harmony with values and principles we teach in the Masters of Social Practice degree. However, I've learned that application of this radical participatory and egalitarian method may not be possible within a hierarchical institution which has a unilateral say in final grading and formulation of learning outcomes. A modification of the method was needed and after a dialogue with John Heron, a founder of the Cooperative inquiry method, I named the approach Academic Co-creative Inquiry. It is strongly based on Heron's philosophy and teaching, but it attempts to accommodate for rules and regulations imposed by an accredited tertiary setting where it is contextualised.

Another aspect of cooperative inquiry which is very conducive to teaching and learning in a transdisciplinary programme on a masters level is the fact that participants are encouraged to learn from one another and to expand one another's horizons. Cooperative inquiry provides a perfect context for peer-to-

peer learning. For a multicultural and a multiprofessional classroom this becomes a major asset, and contributes to promotion of the idea of sustainability as all resources are well utilised and pragmatically focused towards improvement of the quality of life on personal, professional and global levels. Living sustainably is becoming a core idea in many educational environments and it requires a transdisciplinary approach.

The purpose of co-operative inquiry is to understand the world, make sense of life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things, but also to develop new skills and behaviours in order to bring forth the world (Heron and Reason, 1995). Its approach is egalitarian and all participants are involved in the design and management of the inquiry (Heron, 1996). They get into the experience and engage in actions related to what is being explored and then through reflection and dialogue make sense and draw conclusions which then lead to new actions. Although it sounded very appealing to offer a truly experiential and action/reflection oriented course, it was impossible to be true to the cooperative inquiry process over a period of three Friday/Saturday whole day workshop blocks during a semester. Tertiary institutions tend to save costs by minimizing face to face contact with students and by promoting on-line involvement. Cycles of action and reflection needed to be modified, to the point that the process could not be called cooperative inquiry any more.

The academic requirement of having written assignments as evidence of achieving learning outcomes was honoured, but students were encouraged to be as creative as possible in their presentations and many chose artistic, intuitive and charismatic ways of presenting which stepped way out of line of usual academic presentations. At the same time they managed to retain academic rigour by properly referencing and attending to learning outcomes as prescribed in academic course documents.

Students fully engaged in co-creative inquiry learning because it addressed professional issues from a personal perspective and was engaged in political realities in terms of reflecting on the participants' context, their professional roles and their meaning and relevance in their lives.

Creating an inclusive approach when co-creating courses through inquiry

When a course is conducted in this way students receive a letter of invitation to participate in the Academic Co-creative Inquiry, prior to coming to the course. If all agree the course is done as an Academic Co-creative Inquiry. If only one student disagrees, the course is taught in a traditional way, with prescribed assignments, deadlines and requirements. Consensus reaching at this stage is important as it immediately tunes participants into participatory mode.

Due to regulations in any government funded hierarchical institution, learning outcomes are prescribed and often approved by academia long time before the course is taught. Academics, as writers of courses, tend to phrase them as general as possible, using required academic words to fit the prescribed criteria and the required academic level. Ten years down the track these prescribed outcomes in some instances may still be relevant, but in our rapidly changing world students need something more exciting to trigger their curiosity and love for learning. In the field of social practice, realities are changing fast and in order to keep our courses current we need to focus on contemporary issues. When I employ co-creative inquiry, the prescribed learning outcomes are personalised at the beginning of the course and each student turns them into inquiry questions. To facilitate this I use a modified version of Learning Contracts (Knowles, 1986). Students focus on issues they feel passionate about and are related to their future or present professional role. They rephrase learning outcomes into inquiry questions and construct their learning contract to fit their learning styles, culture, interests, age group, context and professional interests. Students form groups according to their interests and personal resonances. Some students opt not to join a group and continue parts of their inquiry individually. Students meet all together over three Friday/Saturday blocks and share their findings. They also organise small group meetings outside of prescribed times to deepen their inquiry or complete their assignments.

Assignments and assessment are discussed and all assignments are self assessed, peer assessed and assessed by a lecturer. Peer assessment is twofold: one peer assessment comes from another student from the class, to promote peer learning, and the other one comes from a practitioner of student's choice,

usually from their workplace or community. These peer assessments by practitioners build professional links and networks and remind students of importance of relevance of the assignments for their professional community. Students choose if they want to do group or individual assignments and they choose the format of their assignments as evidence of achievement of learning outcomes. The main criterion is coverage of learning outcomes as personalised in inquiry questions by students. Students, peer assessors and a lecturer average a final mark. The range of assignment formats and the creativity students express are extraordinary. Students choose to do essays on topics of their interest, learning journals, art work, poems, multimedia presentations, interviews with practitioners. Some even choose to make documentary movies and link them to their inquiry questions derived from proposed learning outcomes.

When they do art work or any metaphoric presentation of creative coverage of their inquiry questions they need to attach a more extensive self assessment which is guided by questions making links with prescribed learning outcomes. This requirement is unilaterally decided by the lecturer and in this sense it deviates from a cooperative inquiry method. This was necessary to ensure academic credibility of the course. Cooperative inquiry type of learning often upsets power dynamics within a hierarchical institution and making transparent links between personalised inquiry questions and proposed learning outcomes served not only as a useful bridge between academic and personal knowledge, but also enabled students to closely connect to proposed learning outcomes and make sense of them. Students were asked to translate a metaphoric expression of learning outcomes back into academic language for the purposes of clarity and bridging intuitive and evident and bridging idiosyncratic and prescribed. I admit that some of the creative richness got lost in translation, but the attempt to make links between learning from the right and left hemispheres of the brain contributed to co-creation of social practitioners able to balance a range of social practice situations which require intuition as well as academic rigour.

The purpose of individual learning contracts is to maintain focus and clarity of personalised inquiries. This is a living document that students can change and modify as they progress in their inquiry. The process is dialogical as the course co-ordinator needs to be informed about changes. The course coordinator must ensure that the individual inquiries still relate to prescribed outcomes. This proved

very useful to track students' progress and a simple e-mail early in the course can ensure success at the end. The contract contains personalised learning outcomes phrased as inquiry questions, learning resources and strategies, evidence of accomplishment of outcomes including the dates of submission and student chosen criteria additional to coverage of learning outcomes. Students are e-mailed contract forms before the first class and they draft them on the first weekend when they decide whether they are going to form groups or work individually on their inquiries.

Peer assessors provide feedback responding to a set series of questions and suggest ideas for improvement. Students are advised to give their assignments for peer assessment when their assignments are almost completed. This contributes to creation of collaborative atmosphere as opposed to a competitive one. Ability to collaborate and work in a team is rated as one of the most important characteristics for employment of social practitioners (Rose, 2007).
Students co-create a course by offering presentations in the area of their expertise or their inquiry interests to the rest of the class, by choosing and inviting guest speakers and by requesting from a course co-ordinator what kind of additional involvement they expect from him or her.

A course co-ordinator initiates the inquiry and provides coverage of learning outcomes in their prescribed form through lectures, discussions, debates and experiential exercises to promote integration of theory, practice and experience. So far each course included a field trip; in 2006 a student offered her home for the last day of the course where she included all of us when talking about her lived spirituality of everyday life, in 2007 we had some of student presentations and a closure celebration in spiritual gardens tended by a social practitioner outside of town and in 2009 the first day of the course coincided with the opening of the Unitec marae[2] and students were part of the opening ceremony.

[2] Marae is a Maori meeting house with a high spiritual significance. Unitec's marae is unique in New Zealand. It is the first marae for 90 years that will have been built entirely in the traditional fashion, reflecting the desire of the Kaiwhakahaere (project leader) and Tohunga Whakairo (expert in the art of carving), Lyonel Grant, to revive the traditional art of building a whare whakairo with structural integrity. That means the carvings are done on weight-bearing posts and beams which make up the actual structure, rather than on a decorative façade that is added to a pre-constructed frame, as is typical of most modern wharenui (houses) (Author unknown, 2009).

A context of mutual trust is essential for this process to be beneficial. Honest and relevant peer assessment is possible only in an atmosphere where fear is eliminated (Glasser, 1998). Full attendance and participation is essential as well as a level of emotional competence (Dickson, 2000, Heron,1992, Postle, 2003) and responsibility which are key characteristics of effective social practitioners. At the end there is a closure celebration including a shared meal and reflection on the process.

Academic Co-ocreative Inquiry into spirituality and social practice, within a Masters of Social Practice programme conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2009 at Unitec, New Zealand

The overall purpose of the course Spirituality and Social Practice is to explore the meaning and relevance of spirituality in a range of social practices and to explore the social and cultural constitution of spirituality by deconstructing ideas, beliefs and practices in order to enable conversations about spirituality. These conversations are intended to promote effective social practice with a range of clients in multicultural settings.

The course addresses spirituality from a personal, professional and political lens and attempts to enable students to integrate spirituality in their social practice without imposing it on clients.

The course was conducted three times in the period from 2006–2009. Academic co-creative inquiry was offered as an alternative to traditional ways of teaching each time and in all three instances students wholeheartedly embraced it. They were delighted with the options it offered as well as with possibilities for collaboration with their colleagues and practitioners in the field. They enjoyed a lack of externally imposed competition, but paradoxically the standard of assignments was very high. Although marks ranged from D to A+ (with an extraordinary number of excellent assignments), all students have done their best.

Inquiry Questions

In the context of social practice spirituality is a very relevant concept, but before I embarked on this journey I was faced with some key questions:

> *How do I teach about the relevance of spirituality in social work in a non dogmatic way and enable all voices to be heard?*
>
> *How do I ensure that students feel safe enough to explore how spirituality relates to their social practice?*
>
> *How do I examine, explore and bring to awareness the effect of blind spots that follow every belief system (including my own)?*
>
> *How do I find a suitable research methodology to inquire about and document something that is as elusive and fluid as human spirituality? (Napan, 2008)*

The answers came from a number of dialogues with John Heron and from reading his book *Participatory spirituality: a farewell to authoritarian religion* (Heron, 2006), which proposed the inquiry method and co-creation as a valid way of expressing and exploring spirituality in a non-authoritarian and non-dogmatic way.

At the beginning of the first inquiry we started with an introduction exploring:

Who are we and what brings us here?

This opening question was supported with following prompting questions:

- Who is like me?
- Will this group meet my interests and needs?
- Is this a place where I can learn?
- Will I be understood, liked and valued?
- How can I contribute?
- What can I get out of this?
- How can my participation in this course help me to contribute better in my community of practice?

Each participant brought along a vocational autobiography (Canda and Furman, 1999) which in all three instances proved to be a great start. In the 2009 inquiry

a very special level of trust was co-created during that exercise as each new story inspired another and created a new level of trust and mutual understanding. Although all students brought along their written versions of their vocational autobiographies, they have left their scripts and spoke with confidence and integrity disclosing some very personal aspects of their spirituality and what calls them to be social practitioners. These introductions almost took a whole day as each participant deepened the inquiry by sharing honestly what brought them to the place they are today. Stories just naturally followed one another and the depth of disclosure was unusual for an academic course. Stories were shared with tears and laughter and a safe space was created from which students were able to start thinking about their inquiry questions, how they relate to prescribed outcomes for the course and how their personal inquiries are interrelated.

Each inquiry had its special flavor. The first one in 2006 was about minorities. Coincidentally, all participants belonged to a spiritual minority: i.e. a Christian from Iraq, a Mormon Maori woman, a non religious Samoan, a Muslim from India, a spiritualist brought up in Exclusive Brethren sect, a spiritual South African atheist, and an agnostic Croatian. This composition enabled an extensive inquiry into power and empowerment, oppression and discrimination and a number of alternative expressions of the numinous.

The second inquiry in 2007 was predominantly about polarities. The class was polarized with one half being very devoted Christians and the other half being very negative about organized religion because of their experiences of oppression or experiences of their ancestors being ostracized and excluded because of their beliefs. This polarization offered an opportunity for an inquiry about cultural and spiritual respectfulness and appreciation in spite of differences.

The third inquiry in 2009 was about the web of life, trust and belonging and how these traits influence social practice. The composition of the class was again very diverse, but students managed to quickly form groups according to their interests. Two students were expecting babies, and two mothers had lost their children. Life and death and bringing forth the life had a very visible presence in the group. This group was composed of very competent professionals who openly

discussed their social practice and how it was influenced with their understanding of spirituality. In this inquiry, personal, professional and global were well interwoven and living sustainably in the rapidly changing world was a core of almost all individual and group inquiries.

All three inquiries were grounded in the following prescribed learning outcomes:

1. Deconstruct cultural understandings of spirituality
2. Critically analyse how ideas of spirituality reproduce social/ power relations
3. Critically examine own understanding of spirituality in order to appreciate the complexity of socially and culturally produced understandings

All also focused on any issues related to spirituality and social practice that students wanted to research and explore (Napan, 2008).

These generic learning outcomes were personalized into inquiry questions. Questions were co-created through collaborative dialogue (multi-logue) and on reflection could be grouped into personal, professional or political questions, however, this grouping is quite artificial as all inquiry questions on some level addressed all three levels of being and participation[3]. Grouping them just shows where the starting point of the inquiry was for a particular student.

Personal questions

- *What are my understandings of spirituality as a child growing up, what has been my continuing relationship with spirituality and what connections do they have to cultural understandings of spirituality?*
- *Does my culture influence my spiritual experience and can I divorce my inherited culture to truly experience spirituality?*
- *How do I overcome the powerlessness created from a family curse, passed down through generations through religious and cultural beliefs?*
- *What do I believe and why?*

[3] Some of these findings were published in Napan (2008). In this paper they are expanded with questions from inquiries that followed.

- *How does my understanding of cultural spirituality affect my approach to social practice? Am I aware of my own biases, prejudices, assumptions? How do I address these?*
- *I want to critically analyze my own meanings and context of spirituality to create space of my positioning and others and to understand dynamics of empowerment in social and power relationships.*

Professional questions

- *What constitutes spiritual abuse and neglect? (I will do a collaborative inquiry on what constitutes spiritual abuse and neglect in social practice with three female clients and another therapist interested in spirituality.)*[4]
- *How does my spirituality inform and support my practice when working with women exposed to severe violence?*
- *Does respecting personal beliefs means that we should treat them as essentially private and not open to challenge?*
- *I am going to explore cultural meanings of spirituality and deconstruct these meanings with suicidal ideations as an example to address the diversity of meanings.*
- *Using Alan Jenkins' (2009) framework for 'Ethical Intervention: a parallel journey for workers" I want to discover how might I work with men (in a group situation) in a way that does not reproduce violence.*
- *How will my developing spiritual awareness inform my social practice and my worldview in the way in which I meet people in their spiritual contexts?*
- *What is the effect of genealogical bewilderment on a person's spirituality?*
- *What are the power dynamics that sit behind spirituality and influence my practice?*
- *Does mine and others' spirituality affect my social practice in bringing about the change in myself, individuals and society?*
- *How do I keep my power under control and how do I ensure that I do not overpower others? How do I allow my power to be expressed? How do I speak and do my truth? How do I create empowering contexts for myself, others and the world?*
- *What gives me courage and resilience to effect change, and speak my truth from the heart – of my trust, myself, and the pain or struggle?*

Political questions

- *What are the implications of migration on cultural and spiritual knowledge and how may this affect social justice, power relationships etc?*

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[4] This was an amazingly interesting process. A student/counselor decided to conduct a cooperative inquiry with three clients and another therapist in her counseling practice, to explore issues of spiritual abuse and neglect. She provided extra time free of charge for her clients who reported it to be exceptionally beneficial for their wellbeing. She submitted her inquiry as a written assignment. This is an example of recursivity which emerges when co-creative inquiry learning processes are involved.

- *How does the idea of spirituality, spiritual connection, identity, belonging, internal essence affect me/my client's ability to act in and on the world?*
- *I want to envision a new dynamic creative culture that freely allows spirituality to exist, which will restore any cultural or religious imbalance, and which will bring us closer to a higher knowing.*
- *How can knowledge from the west and indigenous knowledge collaborate to promote wellbeing?*
- *In what ways can a concept of spirituality reproduce power relations?*
- *How do I understand spirituality and the link it holds with socially and culturally produced 'realities'? I also want to explore the functions of spirituality within each society.*
- *I want to explore the relationship between responsibility, power, and spirituality.*
- *I'd like to explore how my social practice actions can be focussed and relevant to improvement of the quality of life on the planet.*
- *I will critically examine my understandings of suicide and respecting spiritual dynamics in social and cultural contexts.*
- *Could spirituality be seen as a double edged sword either maintaining existing social structures/power relations or bringing about change?*
- *How can deeper exploration of my own spirituality inform and deepen my respect and awareness of the people with whom I work, systems in which we operate and my place within those systems?*
- *I will explore a Samoan ritual practice (ifoga) and explain its relevance to social practice.*
- *What are the emerging patterns of spirituality in a post modern world?*
- *In examining my own understanding of spirituality, I will identify how my practice (social work/counselling) can appreciate the complexity of socially and culturally produced understandings.*

Students were able to change, modify and sharpen their questions as their inquiries progressed. This required a course coordinator being accessible via e-mails all the time and responding to contract changes within 24 hours. As all changes to learning contracts needed to be approved by a course coordinator to ensure coverage of proposed outcomes the response needed to be quick and focused. Some students would change their contracts ten times during the inquiry which showed me that they were working on it and really thinking about it. Those quick e-mails demonstrated my commitment to them and their commitment to their learning, kept us in touch between classes and promoted trust, respect and understanding.

The inquiry process

Students formed groups when their inquiry questions were resonant and engaged in their inquiries between our monthly Friday/Saturday classes. Our time together was used to deepen the inquiry and present findings. We agreed on the set of procedures by which we were going to observe and record our own and each other's experiences.

Written assignments and presentations encapsulated their inquiry and were used as ways of making sense and meaning of the inquiry.

Students engaged in the inquiry and planned it in their learning contract. Here is an example how some students have outlined that part of the contract:

- *I will prepare a paper that presents my inquiry and my findings from the unfolding from this inquiry in a fluid yet structured manner in response to Learning Outcomes One and Three. I will briefly include an overview of my findings for Learning Outcome 2 although this will be discussed in depth in the group presentation.*
- *I will work in a group with three others to address the Second Learning Outcome and we will present this using multi-media*
- *I have pre-selected a range of books from the recommended list that I will review but I will also use books, journal articles and other theses from the web and other sources to gain a more theoretical based understanding of Indian culture (see end of Learning Contract for a book list)*
- *I will keep a journal to capture my thoughts and insights, from my daily meditation practice, arising from contemplative-inquiry into my spirituality*
- *I will use art making and what it unfolds to guide me in my quest*
- *I will attend a Spiritual Retreat in April and allow the creative unfolding from that retreat to guide me in my spiritual growth*

Students were also asked to define obstacles and strategies in place to overcome them. The purpose of this was to expose possible obstacles and in advance plan strategies to ensure success. This is how some of them have phrased them:

- *As I enter my 3rd trimester of my pregnancy in mid April, I would imagine being more tired and less mobile. As such, I will make sure the scope of my work is contained and within my capability*

- *I need to make sure that I don't attempt to "build a marae" with this assignment so managing my own expectations around how I can present my findings will be important*
- *Over reading and under writing*
- *Using focused reading skills, asking self questions about the reading and its relevance to the Learning Outcome questions, and, taking notes while reading*
- *Trying to incorporate too many ideas/interests into a 'unified' piece of work*
- *Remembering that unification or connection of ideas is not the primary aim, but been open to discovery of the things that might not fit, of what else, of possibility. Holding to the notion that* ***THIS IS A PROCESS*** *not an end point*
- *Not have enough fun in the process and strangling creativity and spontaneity*
- *As above, really striving to remain open to the process and not become too overwhelmed with the 'needing to meet all the requirements'. Again having faith in the process and in own abilities*

Students collaborated on their questions during class and while preparing their assignments. As the course was workshopped over three Friday/Saturday whole day blocks students in all three groups suggested that they would love it to be residential and last longer. As our inquiry progressed questions got modified and more focused and there was an increased sense of collaboration and comradeship. Students' areas of practice as well as their cultural diversity provided a rich resource for our inquiry. Case studies from work were brought to the class and explorations of links between culture and spirituality enriched the inquiry process.

Assessment

Each course was peer and self assessed and the course co-ordinator integrated self and peer assessment in the final grade. Particularities of ways of integrating self and peer assessment in the final mark were negotiated on the first day of the course.

All feedback was in a letter form focussing on prescribed learning outcomes and how were they covered, following reflections on their personalised inquiry questions and on criteria students listed in their contract.

Students produced an amazing range of assignments, to list only a few

- *Nigerian spirituality and its relevance to social practice*
- *Critical evaluation of the book "The Secret"*
- *All you need is Love?*
- *KISS – Keep it Simple Spirituality*
- *Collaborative inquiry into spiritual abuse and neglect*
- *Spirituality, Culture & Post-modernism*
- *An analysis of world religions and its relationship to social practice*
- *A call to service*
- *What is the spirit of suicide and how can religion or spirituality face the dilemmas around issues of this nature?*
- *Cultural Identity and Spirituality*
- *Power and Spirituality in our Life*
- *My Rebirth in an Awakening World — Essay with Meditation Reflections*

Some were group assignments, some were individual but all were collaboratively assessed. This is how one of the students commented on the value of peer assessment:

- *This is a test of my integrity and honesty. It really raises my antennas demanding to write my true thoughts and feelings about the quality of the work in relation to my learning.*

As students set their own criteria additional to coverage of learning outcomes, they choose aspects they wanted to improve on. Peer-assessors and the course co-ordinator paid special attention to these aspects in their feedback. As students reported in their evaluation of the course, feedback became more relevant to them than the actual mark. Criteria students chose varied and they reported how beneficial it was to receive feedback focussed on aspects of their writing or presentation that they wanted to improve on.

Here follows some of the criteria students wanted their assessors to focus on:

- *Quality of reflection*
- *Depth of understanding/analysis of issues*
- *Structure and style*
- *Clarity of expressed ideas*
- *Creativity*
- *Ability to demonstrate the difference between my own judgments and preconceived notions with deep reflection and the emerging truth*
- *Ability to work co-operatively*
- *Demonstrate combined use of IQ, EQ (Emotional Intelligence) and SQ (Spiritual Intelligence) in researching, critiquing and presenting findings*
- *Ability to integrate theory and practice*
- *Ability to work in an empowering way*
- *Ability to become a competent reflective practitioner who continues to learn from experience, training and education*
- *Ability to critically think and construct a conceptual framework as a basis for professional practice*
- *Whether my assessors are able to gain a sense of genuine respect and care for the integrity of the people with whom I am wanting to work*
- *Whether my assessors are able to get a sense that the work I put forward is more than merely the words that are spoken or written*
- *Have you been moved in some way by the work presented here?*
- *Has the written work created interest in you to know more about this way of working?*
- *Do you get a sense I like what I'm doing and have enjoyed what I've done?*

Students reported that practitioner feedback was extremely helpful to them as many of them were at the beginning of their professional careers. They also reported that this aspect was initially quite scary and that they have put an extra effort for the assignment to be relevant and meaningful because it was peer-assessed. One of these peer-assessments resulted in a job offer from a peer-assessor. Peer assessment from practitioners was usually very thorough, specific and empowering:

- *The learning outcome two was exemplified in her account of her long silence about her experiences in case she was considered crazy. The*

silence of indigenous peoples, in this case a Maori woman, about her core beliefs in the face of the different values and beliefs of the dominant Pakeha (non Maori) culture, is a clear example of the relationship between social/power relations and ideas of spirituality.

It proved to be beneficial for peer-assessors as well:

- *I have learned not to take as truth her evaluation of herself as educationally inadequate. I have been very impressed at the clear and poetic way she writes, and my respect for her academic competence has deepened. This has made me aware that my Pakeha perspective that 'school achievement equals educational competence' is narrow and racially based.*

Every inquiry ends with a creation of more questions and although students reported that they found many answers during their inquiry, it actually opened up many new possibilities for new inquiries.

New co-created questions:

- *How do we assist clients to articulate the possibly unknown and unspoken aspects of themselves?*
- *How do we maintain accountability for our practice when dealing with spirituality-based issues?*
- *What role does the concept of spiritual supervision play in this work?*
- *How to differentiate projections from intuitions in professional practice?*
- *How to differentiate dangerous spirituality from life-giving spirituality and, when differentiated, how to respectfully guide clients to reject dangerous spirituality without oppressing them?*

Reflections

Students' experience

Instead of conclusion, in a true co-creative inquiry style, student voices will serve as reflection for further development of the method.

- *To begin with, I liked the format – (....), the customized outcomes and options to allow the process to unfold and inform us. This course is really powerful and I really would love to see the format extended to all subject matters.*
- *Due to the course being so organic and personal, it literally opened up lots of areas that I found freedom in for myself. I selfishly used this course for my own journey and so it has been fantastic.*
- *I especially liked how Ksenija did not let issues that came up not to get discussed, we had a safe environment to debate controversial ideas.*

- *Through doing this course I have learned that there are 'labels' or names for what I believe and feel. The Existential and Transpersonal theories where real revelations for me and both theories that I felt I totally identify with.*
- *I believe by having a clearer understanding of what my beliefs are based on will in turn help me to feel more confident in my practice. In the past I always felt a bit airy/fairy about my spirituality, whereas now I feel clear and confident.*
- *I think many people need to be a little more open minded about Christians. I find many Christians rather hypercritical and judgmental. Ironically, I am being rather judgmental about them. I need to remind myself and hold on to the reality that people are people and that none of us is perfect. I also find some religious/spiritual practices conflict with my sense of justice and humanitarianism…i.e. acceptable for men to beat their wives, for a person to have their hand cut off for the crime of theft. I find it confusing at times trying to respect a person's religion, culture, spirituality while at the same time what they are doing conflicts so much with my own. However, in saying that, I have dealt with this in the past and am sure that being aware is the first step to working through a situation.*[5]
- *The best part of this course has been that I finally, after many years, feel very clear and confident about what I believe about my own spirituality.*
- *I had a lot of unexpected learnings, which enriched my knowledge about an area of my life that I wanted to learn more about. Also what surprised me was my concept of God changed which has impacted my life and view or life greatly. It has enabled me to consider and reflect on the impact culture has on people's holistic experience of life. They have also encouraged me to continue staying aware of the injustices often impacting on the lives of the people with whom I work with. Awareness of structural disadvantages is a good starting point in trying to change these. The learning outcomes (in particular no. 3) have also had me thinking of my own standpoint in relation to spirituality. By knowing myself better, my spiritual beliefs and values, I will ultimately become a more accountable, honest and effective practitioner — something both my clients and I will benefit from.*
- *The learning outcomes allowed me to talk about the effect of religion on my family's lived experience. I undertook a structural analysis where I identified key points in my family's history when the family was affected by religious doctrines, these included cousins marrying and my grandmother's decision to leave her husband. In my practice I will be working with people whose lives are affected by external structures including religion and it has given me more knowledge regarding the effect and potential effect of religion on a person's ability to act in and on the world. Of course religion may well be a strength, and it is important not to assume or base my assessment on my own beliefs regarding religion or spirituality. I have also seen how the effects on families can carry on*

[5] This feedback came from a student who participated in the inquiry where the group was quite polarized at the beginning because it was constituted from a group of students with very strong religious beliefs and students who had some bad experiences with organized religion and had totally rejected it. Dialogues and discussions during the class enabled students from both sides to develop genuine curiosity, respectfulness and interest in people who think very differently to them.

through generations, long after the reasons for the poverty, migration etc. have been forgotten.

- *I learnt a lot in this course. To be honest I needed to do this for my own growth also because I really think some of my beliefs and understanding have been quite narrow. I don't feel this is the case now.*
- *Currently I interact with many people from many differing cultural and spiritual (religious) backgrounds. Being clear around my own beliefs and values enables me to also have an understanding of my strengths, weakness and biases.*
- *In the future I very much hope to work in a Social Practice at an international level which will mean that I will (hopefully) be living and/or working in foreign countries where their religious and/or spiritual belief system may be quite foreign to me … having undertaken this investigation has heightened my awareness to cultural and spiritual differences and how they can influence social practice work. I hope with the new understandings that I have gained through this course, added to previous learning, will assist me in being a worthy social practitioner.*
- *This was a very thought provoking paper and one that I learned a huge amount … I feel I added another route to the roadmap of my life. I have done a lot of investigation, inquiry reflecting and evaluation to help me to gain a clearer perspective of what and who I am and this paper has helped to put another piece of the puzzle together… only half way through and I already know that doing this paper has provided clarity and increased confidence in my spirituality and my place and purpose in life …*

Course coordinator's reflections

The course Spirituality and Social practice has been offered three times as an Academic Co-creative Inquiry. Each class had between seven and fifteen students. Each time the course got refined and improved and it can be said that I have been part of a meta-co-creative inquiry by continuously reflecting on it and undertaking activities to improve it, based on each year's experience and reflections gained through collaboration with students. It is not only about improving the course and the methodology, it is about improving myself as a teacher and an academic. The more I improve my being in relation to my students and the subject I teach, the more likely it is that my practice will be transformed. The honest reflection is the core and the most powerful and transformative power of this form of learning, which again proved to be most fruitful when this paper was given for a critical reflection to my mentor John Heron who suggested that this process should be called co-creative inquiry and not co-operative inquiry as it deviates from it in so many ways in order to accommodate requirements within a hierarchical institution.

I have noticed that the **balance of structure and flexibility** worked very well and having prescribed learning outcomes phrased as inquiry questions and then reflecting back on predetermined outcomes in my feedback to student assignments worked really well. The perceived structural constraint of a prescribed Masters program within a hierarchical institution was softened by a co-creative inquiry processes. What was initially perceived as a constraint became a useful scaffold for the inquiry to emerge. Collaborative assessment added validity to the process and various kinds of power existent within a group were explored. The number of assignments was prescribed but format was very flexible, dates were predetermined, but venues were flexible although a classroom was always booked for us as an option. In terms of development of professional **integrity**, students clearly aspired to higher performance, strived to do their best and went beyond requirements for a good master level assignment. Cheating was minimised with only one instance of plagiarism in three years. Clear integration of personal, professional and political dimension contributed to greater honesty and openness about students' goals, aspirations and beliefs. **The balance of internal and external assessment** clearly raised standards. Students were very honest in their self-assessment and although initially intimidated by the idea of having to submit their assignment to two colleagues, with hindsight they all reported how beneficial it was for their learning and the integration of theory, practice and experience. **Inclusivity** was beneficial for all, as an unusual level of trust was developed in all inquiries despite cultural, professional and age differences. As a result, the level of mutual learning was much higher than in traditional masters courses as well as creation of professional links and networks that are so necessary when working as a social practitioner. **Collaboration** replaced competition in the class, however, students competed with themselves striving to produce a relevant and high quality piece of work. **Quality** of assignments was significantly higher than usual. I suspect that the reason for this is that students focussed on areas of their interest, utilised their learning styles and made continuous links with their practice. In three inquiries only two students failed the course: one never submitted any work and one tried to plagiarise. It may be interesting to note that both of these students harboured very fundamentalist beliefs, were unable or unwilling to deconstruct cultural understanding of spirituality and critically analyse how ideas of spirituality reproduce social and power relations. They were not interested in critical examination of their own understanding of spirituality in order to appreciate the complexity of socially and

culturally produced understandings, hence did not cover the prescribed learning outcomes. One of them self-assessed that his assignment was not covering the above mentioned learning outcomes and never submitted, and the other one plagiarised hoping that it would not be discovered and while plagiarizing did not touch on learning outcomes.

Student **creativity** manifested in topics they explored and in formats of their inquiries, was outstanding as well as the amount of work, number of books read and a range of links and connections created during this course. This **personalized and inclusive** approach contributed to students making meaningful links with prescribed learning outcomes which as they reported will have a huge relevance for their present and future social practice. Each of them made those links in their unique idiosyncratic ways.

Another finding is very personal to me as an academic. I have a very low tolerance for boredom and I am a very curious scholar. I also expect my students to be endlessly inquisitive and passionate about their field of practice. In my universe, there is no life or learning without passion, or maybe there is, but it must be a very dull one. Facilitating courses in this way is always novel and interesting. No course is the same and every teaching becomes learning. Co-creating courses with students continuously challenges me as a teacher

This method proved to be very appropriate for the Masters level of teaching. At the moment, I am engaged in another academic co-creative inquiry in the Bachelor course called Creative Social Practice which is differently formatted and is in the process of evaluation now. I believe that co-creative learning is suitable for groups smaller than 25 on an advanced level of learning, however, some aspects of it can be applied on any level. Small classes lend themselves for effective co-creative inquiry learning, however, large classes may be even more suitable as students can form small groups and in that way the course co-ordinator's intrusion can be minimised. The course co-ordinator's job would then be to co-create a space with students to allow more self-directed work to occur in small groups. It perfectly suits all areas of social practice and it will be interesting to test it in another field to discover its wider area of use.

As co-creative inquiry learning has been derived from cooperative inquiry, a literature search shows that there have been many attempts to modify this

participatory methodology to be used in computing (Druin, 1999), literacy and arithmetic learning (Reason, 1999), teacher and school principal education (Byrne-Jimenez and Orr, 2007), social work (Bellefeuille, 2006) and in some primary schools and many other areas of practice. For the world that is rapidly changing, its major advantage has been a development of respectful, self-directed, collaborative, motivated and curious students who are appreciative of differences and uniqueness of each individual, ready to take a stand and bring forth a more inclusive world with professionals who act with integrity. Isn't that one of the main purposes of tertiary education?

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