COMMUNITY-BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:
AN EMERGING FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

LIZA LORENZETTI
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK,
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

DIANE LORENZETTI
CUMMING SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
AND HEALTH SCIENCES LIBRARY,
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

JEFFERY HALVORSEN
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK,
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

MEENA DURRANI
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK,
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

RITA DHUNGEL
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
AND HUMAN SERVICES,
UNIVERSITY OF THE FRASER VALLEY

Abstract

There is growing recognition of the need to implement critical and emancipatory teaching models in social work as a means of fostering liberatory thinking and actions to address an expanding global climate of economic and social inequalities. A critical pedagogy (CP) project

that incorporated transformative learning was initiated in a graduate social work program. The program was designed to create opportunities for students to participate in transformative experiential learning encounters with community-based social justice mentors or *Journey Guides*. A qualitative research approach was used to evaluate the experiences of students and Journey Guides with data collected from focus groups. An Emerging Framework for Transformative Learning (EFTL) was developed from the insights of students, Journey Guides, and faculty who participated in the program. The EFTL offers an approach to fostering critical consciousness and social justice action while resisting colonial and neoliberal demands for skills-based managerial social work education.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, experiential learning, neoliberalism, social work education, transformative learning

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There is increasing urgency for social work education programs to prepare students with the political and ethical foundations to address, with courage, the sociopolitical climates within which the profession is located. Critically minded social workers continue to call attention to the sweeping influences of neoliberalism and colonial objectives on the ethics, teaching, and practice of social work (Blackstock, 2009; Gray, et al., 2013). Despite these efforts, contemporary social work education is increasingly conceptualized as a highly individualized psychotherapeutic form of practice, neglecting critical, structural, and Indigenous discourses and methods (Saleeby & Scanlon, 2005; Sewpaul, et al., 2011). Social work educators aiming to incorporate critical pedagogy (CP) and anticolonial discourse in their teaching and learning face unique challenges, given that neoliberalism encompasses every aspect of the educational system (Harkavy, 2006; Sewpaul, 2010). Within the profession, charity has been elevated at the expense of equity (Lorenzetti, 2013), and pervasive managerialism (Harlow, 2003) and the privatization of social and health services have increasingly consumed teaching and practice (Benn, 2006). These environments create barriers for students and practitioners seeking to uphold their ethical codes of conduct. For example, the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018) states that social workers must "challenge discrimination and institutional oppression" (3.1) and "challenge unjust policies and practices" (3.4). These critical statements are often viewed as lofty and nonpractical ideals by social workers who are confronted with the daily institutional inequities and oppression present in their field of practice.

In a qualitative content analysis of Masters of Social Work (MSW) program syllabi from 60 top social work programs in the United States, Mehrotra et al. (2017) found that most courses focused heavily on "individual-level self-awareness as a key competency (with a central focus on knowledge and skills building), despite a macro/

structural analysis of systems of oppression as the central paradigm of these courses" (p. 229); this raises a concern as to the capacity of such programs to prepare social workers to understand structural oppression and engage in social change. Mehrotra et al. further questioned whether the acquisition of knowledge regarding oppression and social justice translated to more effective practice.

Experiential learning is a core aspect of social work and a signature pedagogical approach with the objective of integrating theory with practice. Heinrich et al. (2015) contend, however, that "critical thinking is not necessarily a part of every experiential learning process" (p. 273), a perspective that puts into question the transformative potential of experiential learning gained through practicum and service learning assignments.

Critical pedagogists (Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1994) critiqued conventional approaches to teaching and learning (McLaren, 2002), viewing them as rooted in technical rationality wherein knowledge is "no longer seen as something to be questioned, analyzed and negotiated. Instead it becomes something to be managed and mastered" (Giroux, 1988, p. 14). Such systems are intent on producing what Gatto (2003) argues are "not only a harmless electorate and a service labor force but also a virtual herd of mindless consumers" (p. 37) catering to the hegemony imposed by capitalist ideologies and values. Conversely, critical pedagogists advance emancipatory and transformative approaches to education which aim to incorporate consciousness-raising in the teaching and learning process through "participatory, inclusive and student-centred methods" (Sewpaul et al., 2011, p. 400).

Although social work has joined the broader multidisciplinary movement of critical pedagogists (hooks 1994; Kolb 1984; Mezirow, 2002), there is a paucity of research-informed models within social work that prioritize community-based and transformative experiential learning for students. Studies that do exist within the discipline focus primarily on the use and adaptation of Kolb's (1984) learning model, or on classroom-based CP (Pugh, 2014). To respond to the need for research-informed teaching practices that emphasize critical pedagogy,

we propose an Emerging Framework for Transformative Learning (EFTL) for social work education.

The need for the proposed framework arose through intentional conversations among activist scholars, students, and practitioners (Journey Guides) from Eritrean, Italian, Nepali, Norwegian, and Pakistani heritage living and working on traditional Blackfoot and Treaty 7 territory in Canada. Over a three-year period, we developed and implemented a relational and experiential process based on critical pedagogical principles and Indigenous teachings within a Master of Social Work International Community Development specialization (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). Students were individually matched with an experienced community organizer and social justice mentor, referred to as a *Journey Guide*, and invited to participate in dialogues and community-based social justice initiatives. While this process was infused within a course framework, students were not provided with grades for participating in these encounters, and Guides were not positioned to grade or report on student progress. The process was implemented in eight steps, beginning with a Blackfoot Elder (who was also a Guide) who opened the program by inviting Guides, students, and faculty to participate in a community supper and a sharing circle. This event was followed by a written assignment wherein students shared their social location, experiences, and aspirations related to social justice community practice. Guides were also asked to provide key areas of knowledge and experience that they would be prepared to share with students, and student-Guide matches were made based on this information. Students and Guides participated in a mentorship training workshop, discussed and signed a mentorship agreement, and began to schedule their first meetings. Instructors organized a World Café knowledge exchange (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) for all Guides and students to deepen their relationships and community-building, while individual meetings, community opportunities, and ongoing feedback loops with students continued throughout a two-semester period. Relational and experiential learning strategies were employed as ways to promote opportunities for critical thinking and transformational change (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). As most Guides were racialized people, with experiences in both Canada and international contexts, the students,

most of whom were White and born in Canada, were provided with both lived knowledge and insights derived from international experiences.

As the program entered its third year, and the tensions of fostering critical pedagogical approaches in an emboldened global climate of White supremacy and neoliberalism became more apparent, our research team and Journey Guides met to reflect informally on the urgency of our collective work. We became intrigued by these questions: (1) What are the key factors that catalyze transformative learning in experiential settings? and (2) How can these be further fostered in social work education? From this inquiry, the team established a three-phase method to create an EFTL which would be grounded in the experiences of those who participated in the Journey Guides project. Building from the learnings of the Journey Guides process (Lorenzetti et al., 2019), in this article, we present a suggested EFTL that incorporates key factors to support transformative learning within a social work context in an increasingly polarized society where transformative learning and conscious action (Freire, 1970/2000) are necessary forms of resistance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION

If social work education is to fulfill its ethical imperative, reflexivity, critical consciousness, and a broad understanding of power dynamics are essential (Sakamato & Pitner, 2005). *Conscientization* (Freire, 1970/2000) is a means to engage "learners to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions & to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 4). Critical pedagogists urge learners to "examine ideas as social and political constructs with effects in the real world" that serve the interests of certain groups over others (Saleeby & Scanlon, 2005, p. 4). Transformative learning, catalyzed by critical pedagogical processes, encourages learners to "question all taken-for-granted values, ideas, norms, and beliefs of experiences that comprise their dominant social paradigm" (Sagris, 2008, p. 1).

Critical consciousness can be fostered through participatory learning environments where the distinction between "teacher" and "student" is replaced by democratic dialogue among a community of learners (Newson, 2004). In striving towards this egalitarian dialogue, the meaning of knowledge is questioned and negotiated through the encouragement of student agency and voice. This coincides with Freire's (1970/2000) view that "education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 72). Similarly, Giroux (1994) contends that CP educators analyze social and political forces and seek to challenge inequality in society by first recognizing the power difference between teachers and students, communities and universities, researchers and subjects. The purpose of this dialogically developed critical consciousness is to stimulate "praxis," wherein students critically reflect on both theories and learning and ultimately take action (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). In essence, the proponents of CP encourage egalitarian relationships, learning as a process of co-operative enquiry, and the striving towards a critical analysis of knowledge and social structures while understanding one's location within them (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005; Sewpaul et al., 2011).

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN SOCIAL WORK

In social work, transformative learning has been identified as a method for developing a commitment to social justice (Ku et al., 2009; Lorenzetti et al., 2019), a key mandate of social work education (International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004). While critical pedagogists aim to create reflexive practitioners who can engage in social action to disrupt and change oppressive relationships and structures (Ku et al., 2009; Saleeby & Scanlon, 2005), very few CP studies and limited frameworks or models have been advanced by the social work discipline. A CP study by Ku et al. (2009) implemented a *Triple-Capacity Building* model (TCB) that centralized the involvement of social work students, educators, and community members as co-learners. This Freirean-inspired model was employed with students completing practicums in rural Chinese villages characterized by multiple socioeconomic challenges. All participants assumed the dual role

of student and teacher, with the intention of fostering more egalitarian and reciprocal relationships and mitigating conventional expert-novice power hierarchies. A democratic and dialogic process incorporated throughout the project enhanced participation and explicitly valued the knowledge of local people in addressing the issues of rural poverty. The field supervisors served as role models by demonstrating a non-expert or nondominant approach to their interactions with students, which in turn encouraged students to adopt similar behaviors when interacting with villagers (Ku et al., 2009).

The *One Million Bones* project (McPherson & Mazza, 2014), another social work study, used CP to engage 33 social work students in international arts-based activism to increase awareness of geno-cide and commitment to human rights. Students integrated critical reflection skills through a four-step learning process: "(1) learning to reflect; (2) reflection for action; (3) reflection in action and, finally; (4) reflection on action" (McPherson & Mazza, 2014, p. 950). A third study, this one by Staral (2003), used an experiential method with three community-based events for undergraduate social work students ($N =$ 16), including a protest, a walk with a pastor who held local knowl-edge of community residents, and attendance at an annual meeting of a social service organization. Students were predominantly White, and middle class. Staral (2003) found that the combination of experiential learning and critical reflection had a transformative effect on some stu-dents. This was reflected by one student who reported a change from seeing a marginalized neighbourhood as filled with "devastation and death to . . . see[ing] concerned people watching over their neighbor-hood" (Staral, 2003, p. 13).

Another related study by Sewpaul et al. (2011) shared the narra-tives of social work students undertaking a participatory research proj-ect in which they engaged with children and youth living on the streets in Mzuzu City, Malawi. The research project focused on mitigating power dynamics during interactions and processes between students (acting as researchers), field supervisors, and community youth. The project centered on empowering youth through encouraging them to tell their own stories, raising awareness of systemic oppression, and motivating them to create change based on their collective narratives

and experiences. Social work students in this study noted that experiencing anti-oppressive practice and critical theory in action, a humane relationship with the educator/mentor, and the geographic and political context in which the project was situated were among those factors that promoted transformative learning (Sewpaul et al., 2011).

These and other published research studies informed the development and implementation of the Journey Guides program implemented as part of the MSW International Community Development specialization. We also sought to advance research in this area by developing an emerging framework for transformative learning that centralizes community-based teaching and learning, which is the core of this experiential and practice-based discipline. The objective of this study was, therefore, to explore and identify the process of transformational learning from the Journey Guides program.

PARTICIPANTS AND STUDY DESIGN

We adopted a critical pedagogical qualitative approach (Kincheloe et al., 2017) to explore the extent to which specific design elements of the Journey Guides program promoted students' transformational learning. An institutional review board approved this study. The research team included seminar instructors, social work student research assistants, MSW Journey Guides program alumni, an experienced mentorship researcher, and a Journey Guide. To develop the EFTL, we analyzed data from three cohorts of students and Journey Guides who had participated in the program over a three-year period. Students and Guides participated in focus group sessions lasting between one and two-and-a-half hours, which were audio recorded and transcribed. In order to reduce study bias and protect student confidentiality, seminar instructors did not facilitate or attend focus groups or analyze non-anonymized data. A total of 21 Master of Social Work students participated in the study over a three-year period: 9 in 2016 (56% of total), 5 in 2017 (50% of total), and 7 students in 2018 (33% of total). A total of 20 Guides who were active in a given year also participated in the study, including 7 in 2016 (44% of total), 4 in 2017 (40% of total), and 9 in 2018 (43% of total). At the beginning of the study, we recruited a third participant group, a Reflective Practice Advisory Group com-

prised of MSW alumni who had graduated from the program prior to the implementation of the Journey Guides program ($N = 6$). Members of this group were primarily women ($n = 4$) and were from Guyanese, Haitian-Portuguese, Indigenous (Tallcree Nation), Irish, Kenyan, and Nigerian heritage. This group met four times over the research period to provide feedback and insight on the aggregated data. We have previously published a preliminary evaluation of the Journey Guides program using data from one cohort (Lorenzetti et al., 2019). In this current paper, we present an analysis of data from all three cohorts and the Reflective Practice Advisory Group that formed the basis of the underpinnings of the EFTL.

DATA ANALYSIS AND EMERGING FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

We employed a three-phase process of thematic analysis (Guest, 2012) to analyze these data and derive relevant themes. Broad codes were created from an initial analysis of each dataset. Members of the research team worked dyadically on focus group transcripts to identify first level themes and highlight relevant quotes; in each dyad, an experienced researcher was matched with a student or community member. Each dyad then shared their initial analysis with the larger team. During the second analysis phase, data from all participant groups were analyzed concomitantly by the research team in three group-analysis sessions. Each dyad presented their themes, and these were cross-referenced with findings from other transcripts. Broad codes were examined, combined, and transformed into higher order themes. Finally, the themes and supporting quotes were further assessed, organized, and developed into a draft sketch of an Emerging Framework for Transformative Learning (EFTL). Concomitantly, the research team conducted a literature review that identified the tenets of key transformative learning models. The research team presented the EFTL to the Reflective Practice Advisory, along with a presentation on the transformative learning literature review, and their feedback was incorporated into the final iteration of the EFTL.

RESULTS

The seven-component EFTL developed from this study is comprised of four intrinsic and three environmental indicators. The intrinsic indicators reflect shifts in an individual's willingness and preparedness to embrace transformative change: (1) openness and curiosity, (2) critical reflection on lived experiences and social location, (3) active engagement in goal setting and aspirations, and (4) progressive shifts in vision, values, attitudes, and actions. The research team identified these indicators as markers of transformative change. As presented in the emerging framework, these shifts can occur in sequence or be experienced iteratively as the participant deepens their personal transformation. Three environmental indicators were also articulated that promote transformation: (1) access to relational and experiential learning, (2) fostering knowledge for liberatory intentions, and (3) opportunities to practice or take action (see Figure 1). These indicators are discussed at length using the experiences and feedback from students and Guides who participated in this study.

FIGURE 1

Emerging Framework for Transformative Learning
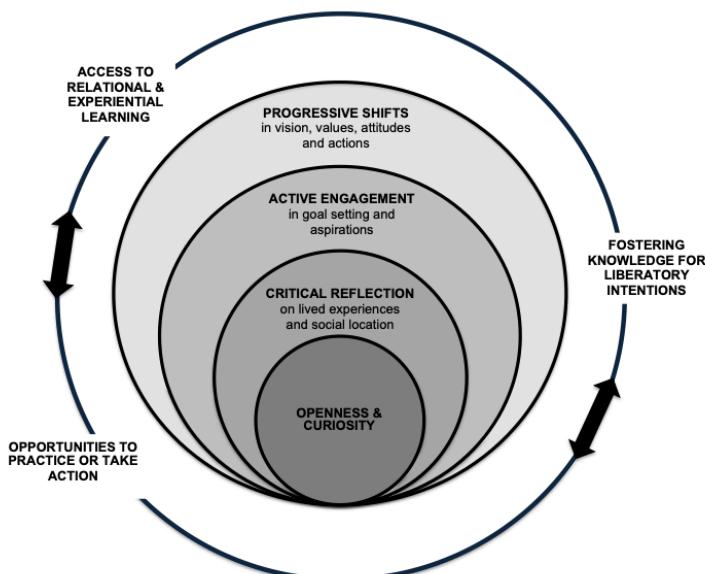
INTRINSIC INDICATORS

OPENNESS AND CURIOSITY

Openness and willingness to learn were identified as personal attributes that aid in establishing a personal context for the transformation of perspectives or worldviews. Students who displayed an open and curious attitude towards learning came to their Guide meetings prepared with questions on topics of interest and identified and articulated gaps in their learning, as one student noted: "I am interested in policy . . . I didn't know what that meant, I asked her about what skills I should develop." This was confirmed by another student: "I was starting to identify . . . a gap for me, so she connected me to someone who was involved in community economic development." A Guide also shared that open conversations made it possible for their student match to redefine their stance as a learner: "Instead of thinking 'this is what I'm bringing to the field,' now his inclination is 'what am I going to learn?'"

In contrast, when students felt that they were very advanced in their learning journey, they were less open to these conversations: "I just didn't have... a ton of questions to ask her about because I have been in Calgary for a long time... it could be because I am a mature student... so I was just unsure of what to ask her and she was unsure of what to tell me." Both students and Guides highlighted the importance and difficulty of asking questions. As one student noted, "I just wasn't comfortable asking. ... You don't know what you don't know… if you are feeling like there is a gap in learning, don't be afraid to reach out for opportunities." A Guide expressed to her student mentee the importance of asking questions as a way of gaining deeper understanding on social issues: "I always take the two year old mentality of asking the why." With openness and curiosity, some students and Guides were able to share critical discussions and reflections, as one Guide commented: "We had some really great conversations and I felt that it was as beneficial for me as it was for her. Very engaged and interested... lots of curiosity." Another Guide mentioned, "She [student] is very very open to anything and she sees everything as a potential learning experience." Not all students, however, were prepared to engage in critical discussions. As one Guide relayed, "I have met with a student

and there is nothing, like they are not prepared, they don't want to talk, they don't have any questions, we sat like it was a really bad date." A lack of curiosity or questions created uneasiness among both Guides and students, with one student noting that she felt that she was "wasting the Journey Guide's time."

CRITICAL REFLECTION ON LIVED EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL LOCATION

Congruent with social work philosophy, a key suggested component of transformative learning is the ability to connect lived experience with one's social location. Some students and Guides found that having similar social locations was beneficial in establishing shared understanding and deepening the potential for transformative discussions. As one student contended, "I found a lot of things in common with my Journey Guide I guess because he is from Eastern Europe and the experiences are very similar because he knows the [sociopolitical context] so, I found it really helpful." A Guide also expressed that being from similar backgrounds helped her to comfortably discuss issues of social justice and ensure that the student would not "shut down." Relationship-building could result from dialogues related to both personal and political subjects such as race and ethnicity, and experiences of oppression/dominance. One student noted that "just sharing past experiences, places we've lived, things we've done, related to our common interests" supported rapport and relationship building, which established a foundation for critical and transformative conversations.

Comparable social locations did not, however, always ensure similar views on social justice. As one White Guide noted, "I pride myself for coming from the anti-oppressive anti-racist perspective, and I could tell that this person was very much not there." However, the same Guide also noted that being matched with someone who did not reflect her ideological views prompted her own growth:

It [the match] pushed me out of my comfort zone and I got used to relating to people that were not at the same stage as me and we were able to find commonalities. It pushed me to kind of move closer to this person and by the end we were talking about

white male privilege. I learned a lot from this person and found ways that I can be supportive.

Additionally, a racialized Guide described how her experience with a White male student was notably transformative for him; here, the point of difference in social location created the space for dialogue on the topics of privilege:

> I was [matched] with a white man who I don't think had considered before the program— what that meant, and what his privilege was—and I think that space was opened up in the program for him to start to reflect and to learn about what white privilege is, and I was able to nurture that. We talked about white fragility and how privilege shows up in the classroom.

Another Guide commented on the ability to find common ground with their student match: "I felt very connected with my student. We had a lot in common even though we were very different." Experiences from the program highlighted that Journey Guides and students with similar social locations and ideologies had an easier time building rapport and entering into critical conversations. This was underscored by one Guide who noted, "I could see myself reflect[ed] in her and I feel like we were in similar places in a lot of ways, so I felt that I could be supportive in that kind of relational way." Establishing rapport at times assisted the Guide and student to discuss power dynamics and concepts of privilege openly and specifically, rather than merely describing the general context. In one instance, a racialized female Guide supported a White male student to think through his social location in relation to his practicum: "He is about to go on an international practicum and we talked a lot about what people in India would perceive of him as a white male and so he is super aware, very cognizant—he gets it."

These guiding experiences demonstrate the transformative potential of building relationships both within and across differences. However, while students valued opportunities to learn from the experiences of Guides with different positionalities from themselves, some felt that these relationships had not yet been established and therefore felt constrained from asking personal questions: "I was dying to know what

his experience was like working on (Indigenous) reserve, but I didn't feel like we had the rapport for me to ask those questions." Another student concurred: "For those kinds of sensitive things that came up in class, I went to people I knew already." Trust-building or establishing common ground were precursors to creating the personal and relational dynamics for critical and transformative conversations. This proved to be complex and varied among participants.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN GOAL SETTING AND ASPIRATIONS

The Journey Guides program encourages students to establish learning goals from the outset through an "aspirations assignment" that includes several key questions about a student's previous experiences, social location, and personal and professional goals related to their program of study (Lorenzetti, 2019). The intent of the exercise is to enhance the guiding relationship by centering interactions and experiences on the goals and emerging professional roles that students define for themselves within the program. Most Guides contended that student goal setting was helpful in formalizing these relationships. While some Guides felt that their student matches were "unprepared, not turning up or not taking this seriously," others commented that students were well focused and eager to learn: "She [student] came to practicum with a crazy spreadsheet of all of the things she wanted to do and then she rated them from one to ten."

Students in the program noted the benefits of the goal setting exercise, one stating, "At the time I didn't know but I came out with a lot in just that one [guiding] meeting." Goal setting also supported students and Guides to focus on specific areas of student development, as shared by one Guide: "It might not be the experience piece, cause maybe they've done it, but maybe they want to go deeper. Maybe they want to talk more about theory." This component of the EFTL allows the student and Guide to draw conscious links between the student's motivation and transformative change goals.

PROGRESSIVE SHIFTS IN VISION, VALUES, ATTITUDES, AND ACTIONS

Guide-facilitated participation in community events and discussions enabled students to connect previous experiences with new knowledge. As exemplified by one student, this created essential shifts in perceptions: "I think that we cannot underestimate the value of all of those individual components acting together. I wouldn't have gained as much understanding from that one presentation if I had not had those previous exposures to the community-based people." As noted by this student, the relational components of the program were key factors in fostering critical reflection as students participated in experiential events or encounters. A single program component in isolation was viewed as insufficient in promoting progressive shifts that were sought through the establishment and implementation of the framework.

Participation in the program also gave students the opportunity to learn about concepts they felt were lacking in their classroom education, such as the role of social work in policy creation and change. Students also appreciated the partnerships that the guiding program created among local practitioners, academia, students, and alumni, noting "lots of touch points of experiences and the same faces kind of coming back is really powerful." A number of students valued opportunities to learn firsthand from Guides and community members who dealt with marginalization and, similarly, several Guides observed that the program allowed students to experience different ways of knowing and working. Some students shared that attending a particular community event cultivated solidarity and hope in being able to create change.

ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS

ACCESS TO RELATIONAL AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

As indicated previously, several students experienced shifts in values and perceptions through learning that was fostered through relationships with Guides and their networks, and opportunities to access social work within community environments. These dialogical encounters (Freire, 1970/2000) were enhanced by minimal power differentials between students and Guides, as the latter did not hold positions of authority over students and were not responsible for evaluating students' academic performance. Guides often acted as bridges between theory and practice, as one Guide noted: "Someone might give an interest-

ing perspective that does not come through schooling; it just comes through life—street sense or community sense." Guides aptly stated that experiential opportunities offered students a chance to explore the background work involved in social justice action, which, in the words of one Guide, included "wash[ing] dishes" at events. Through community-based social justice actions, students learned about initiatives to address important social issues, as one commented: "I went to one of her [Guide] events . . . a sewing class that she runs. . . . It gave me an inside view of what to expect and what is going on activity-wise with[in] the city." Guides also reinforced the importance of students' experiencing everyday community practice, as exemplified by this observation: "When she came to our sewing group it was really chaotic. . . . [She saw] the practical side of community development, so I think she felt she had a little bit of insight into the work I do and what community development means." Through participation in this program, students built relationships with the refugee women who joined the social work program in order to build skills and gain instrumental supports as steps out of economic precarity. Using a community development approach to address social injustice was mentioned by one Guide as "a way to funnel resources to those most impacted by oppression."

Students and Guides both noted that time constraints impacted relationship building. One student said, "To gain all the community development experiential skills I would have to put my actual community development program at risk." Guides also articulated limited availability, which occasionally minimized the extent of student-Guide engagement. "It was just timing that did not match. So . . . either I was busy, or she was busy," one Guide noted. Through discussions with Guides and the analysis of the research team, we understood these time constraints as a feature of increasing neoliberalism, which devalues relationships, values profit-oriented connections, and promotes the attainment of so-called "hard skills" for greater workforce production.

FOSTERING KNOWLEDGE FOR LIBERATORY INTENTIONS

Fostering knowledge for liberatory intentions is crucial to transformative learning, as it challenges students and Guides to appreciate new perspectives, connect their learning to life experiences, and hold

discussions that encourage reflexive practice. For social work, this extends beyond the acquisition of professional competencies or "hard skills" to include the advancement of knowledge towards liberatory actions. Guiding relationships enabled students to deepen their understanding of social issues and explore different ways in which social workers can influence change in local systems. A Guide provided this example: "I give them [students] that perspective of how do you fix the system? I'm not worried about fixing the person or the community of people. It's how you fix the system and usually that's the transformative learning."

Guiding relationships created opportunities for students to reconstruct, connect, and apply knowledge at both a personal level and a local (systems) level. This resonated with one student: "I am a hands-on person... like what does learning mean in practice, and I had a hard time connecting that to like the real world." Understanding the workings of "the system," often seen by social workers as limiting rights and freedoms for marginalized people, is a key step in liberatory social work practice. A Guide, for example, explained how he was able to demystify the local government system for the student, noting that such conversations are "transformational in the sense that sometimes change can occur when you understand what the system really is." Guides also stressed the significance of introducing students to a social justice–oriented lens:

> I like them to think outside of traditional ways of doing things, in terms of not only social work but social justice as a whole. . . . If you really want social justice right, it's never about fixing the group that's being oppressed, it's about fixing the system that is oppressing.

Guides recognized the importance of their role in providing "dedicated space and time to untangle some of the confusion" that students may experience in developing a social justice practice framework. In essence, this dedicated space encouraged students to step away from the expectations and pressures to know, and simply engage in reflexive discussions. This resonated with some students, one of whom emphasized that "it's one thing [if] you go and talk and get ideas and another thing if you share concerns and dilemmas."

OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE OR TAKE ACTION

Providing students with opportunities to participate in activities and events allowed them to translate theory into action. These experiences enhanced students' appreciation of the value of social justice as a practice, as one student commented on her knowledge of community-led action prior to participating in the program: "I know the theory and not the practical part of it." Students provided specific examples, such as participating in a solidarity vigil for Indigenous women's rights:

> It was very inspiring. I went to the march downtown and I helped set up the shoe display [to represent missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls]. It was very powerful... [I learned] the importance of art and creativity in community development.

Another student noted the importance of taking action, stating that action needs to be agentive and not "passive in the audience/student position." Engaging in community-led action required students to assume a degree of responsibility for an event or activity. At the same time, one student reported that the opportunity to participate in events outside of the classroom increased the demands on their time in an already busy schedule and increased their stress. Another student who was employed also found participating in events to be stressful but noted that through debriefing these events with the Guide, it "actually helped me stay in the job because my mentality changed... I understand things differently." While practice or "action" is a hallmark of the social work profession, social work has been highly critiqued for "contributing to dominance in spite of our liberatory intensions" (Pease, 2002, p. 135). The Journey Guides program aimed to strengthen social work students' commitment to action that is orientated towards social justice.

DISCUSSION

There is growing recognition of the need to employ emancipatory teaching models in social work as a means of mobilizing liberatory thinking and actions to focus on changing those conditions that maintain economic and social inequalities. The Emerging Framework for Transformative Learning (EFTL) presents a strategy to catalyze critical consciousness and social justice action towards this end. This

framework can be adopted and employed by academic programs and community-based learning organizations to further social justice in various contexts with diverse populations.

The ETLF does not exemplify a linear path to change but instead depicts an iterative process which, inspired by Kolb's (1984) learning theory, and building on Ku et al.'s (2009) TCB model, expands on experiential learning principles to encourage social work students and community teachers to engage in relational transformative learning journeys. Responses to this experience by students and Guides suggests that, by engaging in goal setting and identifying personal aspirations, students may be better able to develop critical consciousness foundational to the development of a social justice lens. This can then inspire further involvement in those key social issues and service networks that reflect students' passions. The guiding relationships in the Journey Guides program led to transformative growth for both students and Guides; students often developed a greater awareness and familiarity with a social justice orientation, while Guides learned more about themselves, working with difference, and encouraging anti-oppressive and transformative practice.

Our proposed EFTL offers social work educators and those in related disciplines a practical community-focused approach for promoting personal transformation in the context of western neoliberal universities and labor markets. The neoliberal university, it is argued, privileges increased economic efficiency and standardization which works to depoliticize the classroom and decontextualize students and instructors (Preston & Aslett, 2014). This is at odds with social work's commitment to social justice (Canadian Association of Social Work Education, 2017) and the goals of anti-oppressive and critical pedagogy (Mullaly, 2010). Students enter the classroom with the expectation of skills acquisition and are often resistant to critical self-reflection (Reisch, 2013; Smith & Jeffery, 2013) and social justice action. Student learning through a guiding process that centers on the seven-components of the EFTL aligns with students' goals of skills acquisition while also engaging them in social justice experiences outside the classroom; together these can foster critical self-reflection and liberatory intentions.

While students and Guides who participated in this study largely confirmed the benefits of the EFTL, overall student participation in this research study was less than expected, at about forty percent overall. Further, we did not specifically investigate if the transformations that participants expressed were directly inspired by their participation in the Journey Guides program or by other outside activities. We also did not follow-up with the students to ascertain whether their liberatory intentions translated into post-program action in their social work practice.

Additionally, the neoliberal and colonial social climate and the pervasive "banking model" of education (Freire, 1970/2000) cannot be uncoupled from the context within which the Journey Guides framework was implemented. Specifically, students and Guides faced time challenges and questions related to role clarity and reciprocity, reducing the number of times they were able to meet and the quality of these meetings. Future implementations of the suggested EFTL should incorporate strategies to attend to the sociopolitical climate of learning and neoliberal pressures in the context of interactions between students and Guides. In particular, it is necessary to recognize that these inherent tensions within social work (Sewpaul, 2010) derive legitimacy from neoliberal ideals of social control (Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006; Windsor et al., 2014). Simultaneously, the profession grapples to maintain its moral legitimacy "derived from empathetic, dialogical and democratic relationships that may emerge in encounters with service users, and from an understanding of the impact of structural factors on people's lives" (Sewpaul, 2010, p. 258). This contradiction is highlighted by Saleeby and Scanlon (2005), who contend that "many students are prepared to be 'liberators' but are often asked to be controllers" (p. 7).

Encouraging students to set individualized, albeit emancipatory-focused objectives reinforces neoliberal thinking, framing social work education as a primarily individualistic consumer-directed model. In a discipline that should focus on critical self-reflection and transformational change, challenging notions of individualism and relational hierarchies may inform the types of personal and professional goals that students develop (Smith & Jeffery, 2013). The EFTL can also be

used to centralize both social and collective aspirations, as well as engage social work students in contemplating the importance of transformative objectives in addition to professional competencies. Future research should be conducted to determine the transferability of the EFTL to other disciplines and by critical pedagogists who are committed to engaged and transformative teaching and learning in other professions.

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