

# **Moments of Intersectionality: Moving Invitational Theory into Practice Through a Constructivist Approach**

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## **Abstract**

The study explored in this paper describes a course that was purposefully designed using a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. The intent was to stimulate learning within a traditional classroom environment with the specific aim to promote the retention of theory in such a manner that student's would apply it into his/her own professional practice. Eighteen graduate students participated in a teaching, learning, and development course in a university in Southern Ontario, Canada, and learned both invitational and holistic approaches to education. Using constructivist strategies such as self-selection of journal articles and developing a personal synthesis project to name but two, students were encouraged to deeply reflect on their current professional practice in light of both invitational and/or holistic theories of education. This teaching approach encouraged both the retention of knowledge and more importantly the subsequent application of invitational theory into both their personal and professional lives.

## **Introduction**

When Master of Education students experience a graduate course, they often comment on the cookie cutter approach to the overall evaluation process. There is generally a critical review of an academic article, an in-class presentation, a final formal academic paper, and at times a certain percentage is set aside for class participation. This trifecta of assignments (alongside the participation grade) is understood to reflect the theoretical knowledge each student acquired during a twelve-week graduate level course. When students enter my course they often tell me that they find this evaluative template unimaginative as they are given a prescribed reading list, direction on how to lead and participate in discussions, and often given a specific rubric indicating how they will be evaluated on the final paper which often times stifles both their creativity and their autonomy. Many students follow the instructor's direction to a "tee", move on with an "A" in the course, and not long afterwards they are unable to recall what they learned.

Counter to this approach, this course was designed with the specific intention that students would learn both invitational and holistic theories and subsequently apply the theory into practice long after the course was completed. In order to create the type of learning environment that would encourage the application of theory into practice, I had to hone in on the lived experiences of the graduate students enrolled in the course. Thus, the goal of this study was to foster engaged student learning within a traditional classroom such that the theory would become embodied and ultimately embedded, hence employed

in practice in their personal and/or professional lives. The theoretical framework of this study draws on constructivist teaching and learning, but the content of the course, both invitational and holistic theories, play an equally supportive role in bridging theory to practice (Author, 2016). When the lines are blurred between the method of teaching and the content being disseminated, this is where transformational teaching and learning moments are created. This paper explores these moments of intersectionality.

## **Literature Review**

In the following section I provide an overview of the learning theory constructivism as it relates to teaching and learning. As well I provide a brief overview of the two theories that the students were exposed to in the graduate course, Invitational and Holistic Approaches to Education, as the content played a pivotal role in the study.

### Constructivism

In constructivism emphasis of learning is placed upon the learner in order to understand the learners' perspective and how the body, emotions, spirit, and environment can affect the learner (Merriam, 2008). Constructivism is not about transmitting information and facts, as in traditional learning models, but about engaging the learner in the process of inquiry, and taking information and making a connection that stimulates the inner self (Knowles, 1975). The domains of knowledge are the products of classroom activity as 'beliefs', 'values', 'conceptions', and 'norms' (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000), which allow individuals to engage in problem-solving, inquiry, or design tasks. It entails sharing responsibilities and ideas about problems through active dialogue and negotiation (Hanson & Sinclair, 2008; Mintrop, 2001), in order to foster higher levels of critical thinking (Akar, & Yildirim, 2010; Baines, & Stanley, 2000; Gordon, 2008; Palincsar, 1998). "Knowledge is personal and arises out of the experiences and interactions which are unique to each individual" (Baines, & Stanley, 2000, p. 327). It is attained when individuals exchange ideas, "articulate their problems from their own perspectives, and construct meanings that makes sense to them" (Gordon, 2009, p. 738).

Constructivism is stimulated through collaborative efforts of learners. In interacting with others, learners are able to reflect on their existing knowledge structures (Baviskar, Hartle, & Whitney, 2009), which in turn, allows learners to retain more of the acquired information (Akar & Yildirim, 2010). Knowledge gathered from dialogic conversations, in safe spaces created for the speaker and listener, is then actively created, interpreted, and reorganized in individual ways (Gordon, 2009b). "Dialogue moves beyond mere understanding of what is being said to understanding of speakers' reasons for choosing to say what they say in specific contexts" (Rodriguez & Berryman, 2002, p. 1020). When learners are able to discuss what is being learnt and put knowledge into practice the information gained becomes manageable and valuable.

## **Invitational Theory**

According to Purkey and Novak (2015), invitational theory is a “collection of assumptions that seek to explain phenomena and provide a means of intentionally summoning people to realize their relatively boundless potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor” (p. 1). The underlying theories that are foundational to invitational theory are the perceptual tradition, which holds that everyone has a unique view of the world, self-concept theory, which honours the beliefs and values that each person holds, and democratic ethos, which is based on the conviction that all people matter and that they can meaningfully participate in self rule (Purkey & Novak, 1996).

The key ingredients to invitational theory are the elements of care, respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality. They “offer a consistent ‘stance’ through which human beings can create and maintain an optimally inviting environment (Purkey & Novak, 2015, p. 3). The 5 P’s that make up the ecosystem of invitational theory are the domains of people, places, policies, programs, and processes. These five domains contribute to the success and or failure of an individual in almost every environment human beings operate (Purkey & Novak, 2015).

How the 5 P’s are integrated into one’s professional practice is dependent on the level in which a person typically functions. According to Purkey and Novak (2015) this “determines their approach to life and their ultimate success in personal and professional living (p. 5). The levels are as follows; intentionally disinverting; unintentionally disinverting; unintentionally inviting; and intentionally inviting. The levels provide a check system for the 5 P’s. One can function in an intentional manner at the lowest toxic level, subtracting from human existence. This is being intentionally disinverting. In contrast, one can function at the highest level of being, which is intentionally inviting, adding to human existence. When functioning at an unintentional level, whether it is unintentionally inviting or disinverting, a person is not as aware as someone who is functioning at an intentional level. Hence, guiding graduate students to become aware in all dimensions, with self and others both professionally and personally, is the aim in invitational theory. As mentioned earlier, becoming intentionally inviting has the potential to add to human existence. This is the ultimate goal of invitational theory.

The aforementioned fundamentals of invitational theory are simplistic to teach, and are easy to “sell” on paper. The theory displays beautifully into a concise easy to follow flow chart (see Purkey & Novak, 2015) starting with three foundational theories; elements that are easy to understand, an ecosystem made up of 5 P’s, a manageable four levels of functioning, and finally, the four dimensions personal/professional, self and other. However, putting invitational theory into practice is difficult since it requires a tremendous amount of intentional effort in all facets of both one’s personal and professional life. This

was the impetus for conducting this study. I wanted to find out if using constructivist teaching strategies would promote the transformation of knowledge from theory into practice rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge that remains static in a 2-D flow chart.

### **Holistic Education**

Holistic education is when the whole person mind, body, and spirit are attended to through the planning and implementation of a curriculum. It is creating a connected space that “fosters relationships between subjects and various forms of thinking, and builds community” (Miller, 2010, p. 12). Inherent in this environment are the three principles of holistic education: balance, inclusion and connection (Miller, 2007). Creating a balance between imparting knowledge and cultivating creativity and imagination is something I always strive towards. Within the principle of inclusion, I attempt to link the various educational orientations such as teaching to transmit knowledge, using two-way transactional approaches, and teaching for transformation. Transformational moments are best realized through experiential learning opportunities where learning can be “felt–understood in a bodily and sensuous way [offering] an emotional learning experience” (Jickling, 2009, p. 167). The third principle of holistic education is making connections through relationships in order to “move from fragmentation to connectedness” (Miller, 2007, p. 13). The various contexts that can be explored are the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, mind and body, domains of knowledge, self and community, and finally, relationship to the earth and to the soul (Miller). Planning a curriculum with a holistic stance in mind increases the chance for embodied leaning to take place.

### **Description of Course Assignments and In-Class Activities**

A brief description of the course assignments is presented next. If a more detailed description is required, see *Two Theories in Attunement: An Invitational and Holistic Approach* (Author, 2016).

### **Personal Experience Assignment**

In the personal experience assignment, students were asked to explore an invitational or holistic approach using their personal context (teaching, administrator, and/or health care) in order to discover their values, beliefs, and assumptions about invitational and holistic education. The goal was to become intentionally inviting. The final product of the personal assignment was unique to each learner. They had the option to complete a blog, a dialogue journal, write a personal narrative grounded in the theory or examine their personal invitational and/or holistic approach to name a few.

## **Knowledge Assignment**

Students were required to write a formal academic paper and critique the concepts explored by either an invitational or holistic educational theory and conclude with an overall assessment of the major contribution(s) and quality of the work.

## **Synthesis Assignment**

The synthesis assignment gave each student an opportunity to explore the topic of invitational and/or holistic education, or both, in a way that made sense for them. They were free to choose any aspect of the theory and choose any presentation format. Some examples include, but are not limited to, power point presentation, a game, image collage, daily log, concept map, oral discussion/presentation, video presentation, graphic display, formal writing, poetry, and so forth. The expectations were clear that (a) invitational and/or holistic literature was clearly incorporated into the assignment, (b) the product was well designed and well executed and showed substantial treatment of the topic, and (c) the students thinking had to move beyond description or narrative to include some aspects of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, integration and /or contextualization.

## **Circle Meeting**

Integrating Kessler's (2000) council process into each session, I opened each class by inviting students to sit in a circle. I ceremoniously lit a candle while making a dedication to the group and then proceed to listen attentively to each member as s/he holds council when in possession of the speaking rock. The rules that guide our circle meeting are simple: opening dedication; value of the speaking rock; active listening; right to pass; closing remarks, and last; what happens in the circle stays in the circle (Kessler). It is a strategy that evokes emotions and in doing so opens the door for building community with a group.

## **Collaborative Conversation**

Participants were tasked to search for two or three academic articles for each class that aligned with the session topic, that were of interest to them and that if possible it related to their professional practice. The students would arrive prepared to discuss the content in groups of four students. Each week groups were reformed. My role during the collaborative conversation was to physically move from group to group. I would listen, engage, question, provoke, interrogate, and make anecdotal comments before moving on to the next group. There is an embedded element of trust, as well as the ability to relinquish power and embody the qualities of a facilitator when using this in-class strategy.

The assignments and the in-class activities described above, informed many of the participants responses during the semi-structured interview, hence I felt it was important

to provide a brief overview so there was a familiarity with what was expected from the students who enrolled in this course.

## **Methodology**

Within the educational community, self-study of teacher education practices has emerged as an important field of inquiry (Loughran, 2004). For this study, self-study is used as a methodology that attempts to better understand the theory/practice divide by focusing on my constructivist teaching approach. Although there is much debate around what constitutes a standard self study, the essential qualities of self-study are that, “there is a commitment to a quest for understanding...it is formed and maintained in relationship with others...at its core, it embraces a moral imperative...and ultimately there is a point where the self is invited to be more than, or better than, itself” (Bullogh & Pinnegar, 2004, p. 340). In addition, is it commonly understood that the role of self in a self-study project is less about looking at the self than it is about look at what is going on between self and practice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

In the present study all essential qualities were present. I needed to explore if teaching through a constructivist lens allowed knowledge to become embodied and practiced in one’s day-to-day life and these results would then inform my practice. For me, there is a moral imperative to critically reflect on my practice so that I can provide the most effective teaching and learning environment possible. With this in mind, in order to explore my teaching practice, six to eight months after the completion of the course, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the students who consented to participate in the study (see Context and Participants as well as Data Collection for additional detail).

## **Context and Participants**

The participants of this study were graduate students enrolled in a Master of Education course Invitational and Holistic Approaches to Education. A diverse group of students came together in the course ranging from nurse educators, to nurse practitioners, educational administrators, therapists, and finally elementary and secondary teachers from both the private and public sector, including a range from beginning to seasoned teachers. Most were enrolled in the teaching learning development field of specialization (FoS) but a few were enrolled in the socio/cultural FoS as well as a few in the administration and leadership FoS who were taking this course as an elective. When Research Ethics Board (REB) clearance was granted and all assignments were evaluated, I invited all the graduated students from the class to participate in the study. Of the 18 students enrolled, 14 consented to take part.

### **Data Collection and Sources**

The data for my study was collected from semi-structured interviews, my personal journal, and a course feedback form.

## **Semi-Structure Interviews**

Six to eight months after the completion of the course, I conducted and tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with 14 of the 18 graduate students who consented to participate in the study. Most interviews took approximately one hour, but many went on much longer. I asked the following questions:

- 1) Could you share with me anything you recall about the course content for Invitational and Holistic Approaches to Education?
- 2) What course materials were utilized throughout the term and how were they utilized?
- 3) In your opinion, how was the course delivered?
- 4) In the past 6 to 8 months, have you implemented any invitational or holistic strategies into your own practice?  
If so, could you explain what they are, how you implemented them and why you chose to implement them?  
If not, why did you not choose to implement them into your practice?

I personally transcribed all the tape-recorded data. (see Data Analysis)

## **Course Feedback Form**

At the end of every course I teach, in addition to the mandatory University course evaluation, I ask students to anonymously provide me with feedback. Here is the invitation:

I would appreciate if you would take the time to fill out this Feedback Form so I can continue to improve my practice as a Teacher Educator. There are four sections: Course content, materials used, delivery, and professional growth. In the space provided would you be so kind as to reflect on the topic and make any comments specific to that area.

It is not mandatory, but rather an option to fill in the form, however most students do take the time to provide me with feedback.

## **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the study was to determine whether my constructivist teaching practice enhanced a student's learning experience such that s/he was more likely to apply the invitational and/or holistic theory into their practice. I initially transcribed all the interview recordings and analyzed them. Open coding began by reviewing the data line-by-line and taking initial notes in order to gain an overall sense of the content (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Axial coding was utilized for comparison within and across participants' data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using a constant comparative method

allowed the category scheme to be reworked and adjusted to maintain relevance as the data were reread several times (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The resultant categories informed interpretation of the data and provided the basis for reporting (Creswell, 2013). What emerged from the data was a direct link between the assignments and in-class teaching strategies. At this point I revisited my journal and the Course Feedback Form to triangulate the data since the interview questions echoed the intent of the Feedback Form. The process of data analysis took on a spiral approach in which I moved “in analytical circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (Creswell, 2013, p. 182). This movement between the three sets of data became indispensable since I was able to track the emergence of how the students perceived they were both taught and evaluated and then was able to make connections to potential retention and implementation of the theories.

## **Findings**

The data from the semi-structured interviews, journal, and course feedback form, illuminated an intersectionality between my constructivist teaching approach and the course content. Since both invitational and holistic theories of education have the potential to be experienced at an embodied level, the findings suggest that using strategies that also draw on emotional spaces created transformational learning moments that carried over into the participants personal and professional lives well after the course was completed. In many cases the intersectionality experienced by the participants elicited an emotionally driven response. As a result, one hundred percent of the participants shared stories and examples of how they were applying primarily invitational theory into either their professional practice or their personal life. In this section, the findings are categorized according to 1) Strategies Employed (including assignments and in-class activities), 2) Making Sense of the Experience: Moving Theory to Practice which answers my research question.

## **Strategies Employed**

The participants were asked how the course was delivered. Considering I had many teachers enrolled in the course, only one participant was able to name my teaching approach as constructivist and this response came from a nurse educator. However, the remaining participants clearly described a constructivist approach. Comments such as: “you were able to draw from our own meaning”, “there was flexibility”, “what I learned in class what not just the knowledge, but the experience”, “class was taught in an invitational manner”, “instructor made content connect back so I could make my own connections”, “incorporated student issues”, “student centered”, “self-directed”, and “the course was an inner reflection of me”, clearly indicated that they experienced a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. It made no difference that they could not name constructivist as the learning

theory employed as their embodied memories of the class certainly exemplified what a constructivist class looked like and more importantly what it felt like. The participant's comments validate Merriam's (2008) statement that in constructivism, learning is placed on the learner in order to deeply understand one's own spirit, emotions, and the environment which can affect the learner. The results also support Baines and Stanley (2000) who articulate that knowledge is personal and that it emerges out of one's own unique personal experiences. Using strategies such as the circle meeting and the collaborative conversation while modeling invitational theory has the potential to bring the cognitive process into the body and out of the head.

### **In-Class Activities**

Every week I started the class with a Circle Meeting. As described earlier, it is an integrative holistic approach I have been using since I conducted my Master of Education research when I explored the question, "XXXXXXXXX?" (Author, 2002). However, within the context of this study, I was surprised by how many participants mentioned the opening circle. Ten out of the 14 participants mentioned the circle meeting in response to each of the questions. They mentioned it when asked about course content, course materials (mentioning the rock and candle), how the course was delivered, "spiritually, getting at the heart of things", and one participant had even implemented it in his own classroom. The circle meeting seemed to transcend the interview questions, which begs the question, why? One gentleman suggested this:

The circle at that beginning...I've never done anything like that, and you know, it is the start of the day, and it brings emotions right to the surface, and you could see it because it was not like we were just sitting there talking; we were also looking at each other. I think the circle is related to everything else because again, like I said, you get used to being there, and you get a sense of who everyone is and a sense of trust, and so with the conversation that follows people, I think, felt freer to disagree and to push each other. Maybe it is that idea of creating a safe space.

This comment gets at the heart of intersectionality. The circle meeting is both a holistic approach as well as a constructivist teaching strategy. It also honours many of the tenets of invitational theory such as a democratic ethos, care, trust, and respect. Also, there is a level of intentionality to the circle meeting the premise being that when we are in the circle we will all be intentionally inviting towards each other. Kessler (2000) calls it active listening. There is a depth to the learning experience in the circle that is beyond the cognitive impulse to simply memorize theory. In fact there is a embodied experience that encourages each person to open his/her heart to the Other, and in doing so prepare one's self for knowledge to become embodied.

Here is a broad representation of responses that cited the experience of the circle meeting:

“The silliest little thing like eye contact and looking someone directly in the eye and acknowledging them”, “looking at each other forced us to go deep into topics”, “safe”, “non-confrontational”, “supportive”, “laid back”, “right to pass”, “opened up”, “not a lot of pressure”, “I could go off topic”, “sharing”, “connection”, “comfortable”, “connected”, “mutual respect”, “emotional”, and finally, “people let down their guard when they feel accepted and valued.”

All of these comments support Gordon’s (2009b) notion of constructivism when he suggests that when knowledge is gathered in safe spaces and created both for the speaker and listener, that this teaching strategy encourages knowledge to be actively interpreted and reorganized in different ways. It also supports two principles of Miller’s (2010) holistic education that are inclusion and connection. Through this potentially transformational experience the participants opened up, felt safe, and felt a connection they had not experienced before in a graduate course. This will be discussed in more depth in the Making Sense of the Experience: Moving Theory to Practice section. For now, what became evident was that the circle meeting experience, which participants responded to throughout the semi-structured interview, clearly laid the foundation for theory to be applied in practice.

### **Collaborative Conversation**

Six participants specifically mentioned the collaborative conversation when asked about course content. One of the weekly tasks was for the graduate students to search for academic articles that were of interest to them under the assigned topic of the week. For example, when searching for invitational education articles, students found examples reflected in administration, self-talk in therapy, and strategies for utilizing an arts-based approach to teaching to name a few that reflected the interests of the students I was working alongside. The articles directly reflected their professional interests. One of the comments was “I like how we made it our own.” Another participant commented on the “diversity of the articles brought to the table”. One further comment was “we used our critical faculties to find readings which were more authentic and useful.”

Each week, a group of four students would meet together and delved into the theory topic or that session and discuss the article(s) in relation to each person’s professional interest. Having the students work in these collaborative groups, the members developed a deep connection with each other since oftentimes personal stories would emerge as a result of the personal article selection. Also, regrouping so they could meet with different students each week encouraged them to become aware of different points of view in relation to both the theory and the person’s values and beliefs. This became a popular weekly task.

One participant stated that this was the: “best course [she took] in twenty-two years – the group was dynamic and diverse and came to the table with all kinds of perspectives, which made it both professionally and personally enriching.” Another woman was lost when I first introduced this weekly task, but quickly figured out a personal strategy:

I didn’t know where to start, and then I started to take the research into it, and I was like, this is really cool. It was cool because there was not a lot of pressure for me to learn what you wanted me to learn. I was learning what you wanted me to learn, but I was doing it on my own time through my own experience.

She took control of her own learning and negotiated a strategy that worked for her. A final comment comes from a woman, who concluded:

You modeled how to create community and how to set the tone for the course. You did not have to tell me about invitational and holistic concepts since I was experiencing them while I was learning this way, and I was able to directly apply those concepts to physical education. I could explore the theory in my own way to develop an understanding of it.

The comments from the participants validate Baviskar, Hartle and Whitney’s (2009) notion that constructivism is stimulated through the collaborative efforts of learners. By having the student’s meet, share, discuss, and reflect on their existing knowledge structures in relation to invitational and holistic theory, they were able to retain more of the acquired knowledge. Also, according to the participants, sharing responsibilities and ideas about problems through active dialogue and negotiation seems to foster a higher level of critical thinking which is in alignment with Hansona and Sinclair (2008).

Similar to the gentleman’s comment regarding the circle meeting in the previous section, the final comment above also gets at the heart of intersectionality but from a different vantage point. She understood that I was modeling the theory through a constructivist approach and in doing so I did not have to “tell” her about invitational and holistic concepts since she was experiencing it. Through this embodied experience she was able to apply the theory.

### **Making Sense of the Experience: Moving Theory to Practice**

To my surprise, when asked how the course was delivered, many participants responded by sharing how it wasn’t delivered. They chose to juxtapose their experiences with other graduate courses to make sense of their experience in this course. As I reflected upon their responses, I came to the conclusion that the course delivery was so vastly different from anything they had previously experienced that this was the only way they could make sense of it. Many of the responses answered my research query: Does teaching in a constructivist manner encourage engaged student learning such that invitational

and/or holistic theories become embodied and ultimately embedded, hence employed in practice in the participants personal and/or professional lives? As I mentioned at the outset, there seems to be a trifecta of assignments that permeate the graduate course evaluation process: a critical review of an academic article, an in-class presentation, and a final formal academic paper. This template apparently stifles both the student's creativity and their sense of autonomy. When graduate students enter my course they told me that they experience self-directed learning, choice, collaboration, modeling of theory, and in-class activities that call upon one's emotions and even engages their spiritual nature. One participant directly stated: "in comparison to other courses, this one helped me to retain [content] and therefore implement it into my practice." However, he did not go on to share specifically what part of the course helped him to retain content.

Another participant stated that, "the manipulation of the framework is what I want and need. I want to experience other ways that push my boundaries. That's what I want from a grad program. I can regurgitate and write a test but what am I getting out of it?" This response confirms that experiencing knowledge in different ways such as circle meetings, collaborative conversations, synthesizing knowledge, and so forth, is more meaningful than a one-way transmission of knowledge.

Creating an environment where difference flourishes and boundaries are pushed, allows other ways of knowing to emerge. Another participant corroborates my point: "I know you want learners to learn. You are trying to push the class to a point where they will extend their thinking and I don't think you could do that if you didn't have the open-endedness of the class." She is correct in her assumption. The open-endedness allows for other ways of being and knowing to thrive.

A further participant stated: "I left that class feeling different than how I felt after a course in a regular university classroom." Last time I checked, we were in a regular university classroom but for her it did not feel like one. It seems teaching in a constructivist manner does move theory out of the abstract and into another realm while increasing the chance of it being applied in practice. She continued: "I felt different ...it was all those feelings and the delivery of the course, it was very laid back and very relaxed. It was paced for each individual student. The pacing was good." Again, one of the tenets of constructivism is to cognitively meet the students where they are, not where the instructor insists they be and in turn guides them towards new ways of learning, exposes them to new theory, and along the way, if possible, encourages collaboration with as many different people as possible so they do not get too comfortable with like minded colleagues.

The final cluster of examples came from teachers who provided me with an overabundance of examples of how they had either implemented the invitational and/or holistic theory in practice or how they have changed their ontological position as a result of experiencing this course. For example, one woman said, “I am more open to give a ‘redo’ assignment to a student that needed it” whereas before she wasn’t open to that option. This is not a concrete example of moving theory to practice...or is it? What constitutes theory? Perhaps now she is attempting to be intentionally inviting. Regardless, for me it does not matter, what matters is that she is more open to giving a ‘redo’ to a student who requires another opportunity to demonstrate what s/he has learned. It is a win/win situation.

Participants became more reflective. One woman said, “I am trying to be more intentional in my classes – the problem is that days when my energy is low and I am withholding something, I am wrestling with that. Disinviting policies are hard to navigate.” What I respect about this woman’s response is her authentic self. Implementing invitational theory is not easy, in fact becoming intentionally inviting is hard work. I suspect from her response that she is attempting to put invitational theory into practice since her response reflects the inherent challenges that are present when working towards becoming intentionally inviting.

Another participant reflected on how he is perceived, “I am working on how I can be more open to how I present myself. I think people should come to me [for assistance] but am I inviting them to come to me? I never looked at how people perceived me until now.” This fellow is working within the dimensions of self and others in a professional capacity. Before learning invitational theory he never even thought about how he was being perceived by others. This example illustrates a deeply reflective stance. How he reconciled this has yet to be determined.

Another teacher stated that he, “made connections with his students and is trying to be more invitational by reflecting on his actions.” His inner voice now says, “Let’s see how I can rephrase that to that student so I can make him feel good instead of making him feel not so good.” Again, this illustrates a retrospection and reflection in action, where in the moment he is attempting to be intentionally inviting.

Another woman brought a concrete example of a grade one community wall with her to the interview to share with me how she had adapted an idea I had shared with the class from when I was an elementary grade eight school teacher. The Community Board example I shared was presented on mural paper attached to a wall. She had her students write positive comments to one another on a thin piece of foam board the size of a bristol board. This way the grade one students could take the board to their desks and access it

easily when writing their positive words. This was a developmentally sound example of how she took an upper grade level idea, adapted it, and is now guiding her young students to become intentionally inviting.

Another participant shared a transformational experience:

Sitting in the classroom and experiencing that way of teaching even though it wasn't really you teaching us, it was you leading, I felt that I was very productive. I felt so productive that I took ideas [from a classmate's presentation] and used them in my professional development meeting. I was not hesitant to do so even though I knew that when I let [my staff] go, I would not know what to expect. It just made me realize that everyone does have great input from their own life experiences that they may want to share. I would never have thought of doing this because I had never experienced letting a staff do that. They are happier since they got to share their ideas and experiences. Our school culture is better, more positive now."

In this example, this woman was an audience member for an in-class personal synthesis presentation from a fellow classmate. Long after the class was over, she had retained the idea she had experienced. As a school administrator, she tweaked the idea and made it fit into her own school context and implemented it with her staff. Instead of trying to control the outcome, as she always did in the past, she allowed her staff to share their ideas and experiences, gathered all their ideas and then implemented them into the school culture. As a result, her school culture is better and more positive. This is an exemplary case where not only is the theory brought to life in practice, but her story also illuminates the risk often required and more importantly the fear she overcame in order to implement this professional development exercise.

A further example is from a woman who shared a story where she picked up on what someone presented in one of the synthesis presentations. In the presentation the woman stated, "I want to make my students feel like they are guests in my living room." Now, when this teacher is in her classroom, she has a new understanding and awareness of who she is, what her role is, and the power she has over how she could make someone else feel. She never realized she had the power to both make someone feel really good, or really bad. Now she just wants to make everyone who enters her classroom feel like they are "a guest in her living room." Simply put, she is practicing becoming intentionally inviting.

Another participant shared that she "took something every week from the course and implemented it because it was demonstrated. She continued, "I felt your genuineness through all the course material and the way we discussed the course material." Modeling theory in action within a sterile classroom is an organic way to bring the theory to life for

students. It requires thoughtful planning. Even though I am not certain what she “took” and “implemented” from each class I do know that modeling the theory so she could see it in action is what was meaningful for her.

Finally, one woman used her final synthesis assignment (a video illustrating holistic education’s balance, inclusion and connection) as her Professional Development plan and showed it to her Department. All of these examples clearly illustrate how invitational theory and one example of holistic theory was implemented and applied in practice months after the course had come to the end.

I found it interesting that not one participant mentioned the knowledge assignment, writing a formal paper, as a memorable learning moment. I believe this is because writing a formal academic paper is an exercise that graduate students experience in every graduate (and undergraduate) course they take. Its absence in this study suggests that this type of assignment does not foster application beyond the course. Perhaps this is why the theory/practice divide exists.

I will end this section with two examples that were personal in nature. One woman recalled the impact of her final synthesis project where she created a map that helped her to synthesize all she was experiencing in her young adult life. What she realized was that she wanted to become a more positive person and also become more appreciative of all the good things that were happening in her life. This clearly illustrates someone who is working on the dimension of self on a personal level.

Finally, one participant talked about mindfulness and some of the embodied ideas that were discussed in class such as ritual and routine. Her response was more metaphysical than any other participants. She said,

Invitational and holistic approaches are more of a mind set than anything else because you know, all things aside, teaching is life and not just about your life. It’s also about the lives of others. It is that holistic idea that we are on this earth, we are connected, and what we can we do, you know, so we can feel that positive energy in the midst of all these crazy things that life throws at us – change routines. Changing routines involves changing priorities. To make change you need a genuine commitment and follow through.

The intersectionality of both invitational and holistic theory is intricately woven throughout her response. I do not know where one theory begins and the other ends. I will let the intention of her words lead me to my final thoughts.

## **Conclusion**

When I evaluate student course assignments, students often share with me that they will be applying invitational theory in their professional practice. I believe they tell me this for two reasons, one because the invitational theory on paper looks manageable and easy to apply. Also, I believe they tell me what they think I want to hear with the hope of earning an “A”. As a result, I become skeptical of their declaration. It is for these reasons that first, I feel ashamed of my biased assumptions, and on the flip side, I am elated by the findings of this study.

The findings clearly indicate that being immersed in a constructivist-designed course stimulates learning. This corroborates the findings from a previous study I conducted (Author, 2012). However, when the content being taught provokes an emotionally driven response such as invitational and holistic theory, the constructivist strategies create an intersectionality that deepens the learning experience. It is at the intersection of the content that is being taught, and how it is being taught, that heightens the learning experience. This not only promotes the retention of knowledge but also encourages the participants to move the theory from the abstract and apply it in either their professional or personal lives. I was pleasantly surprised that one hundred percent of the participants in the study could provide concrete examples of when and how they were applying invitational theory in practice six to eight months after the course had come to completion. This supports the notion that knowledge has the potential to become embodied when non-traditional teaching strategies are employed. When a teacher solely uses a one-way transmission approach s/he rejects the body and soul as potential spaces that can both absorb and hold information. Many participants provided examples from the learning experience that reflected connection, a safe non-confrontational environment, being valued, being listened to, mutual respect, becoming emotional, and accepted for who they are as a learner, to name but a few. I believe in fostering a learning environment that honours the learner first. I firmly believe that this creates a space for deep learning to occur. Content from the invitational theory being taught such as care, respect, trust, optimism, and becoming intentionally inviting, were not just theoretical buzz-words independently read by the students in a journal article during a solitary homework reading assignment. Rather the theory came to life through a constructivist driven curriculum where I intentionally modeled the theory so the students could live it.

This intersectionality between teaching strategy and content meets at the point of authenticity. When the participants felt accepted and valued they let their guard down and in doing so exposed their authentic self. At this level of authenticity they wanted to become self-directed autonomous learners, they want their boundaries pushed, and they wanted to become better human beings. This is what invitational theory asks of all of us, myself included. It asks us to “realize our relatively boundless potential in all areas

of worthwhile human endeavor” (Purkey & Novak, 2015, p. 1). This is not a flighty call but one that requires focused intention through all aspects of both our personal and professional lives. I have answered the call and in turn I now guide graduate students to do the same.

Personally, I attempt to live a life where the whole person, mind, body, and spirit are attended to. It is from this balanced, inclusive, and connected holistic (Miller, 2007) position that invitational theory found its way into my life. The two theories are in attunement (Author, 2016). Balancing the five P’s, the four levels of being invitational, the dimensions of self and others, as well as becoming aware of perceptions in relation to my own self-concept is a holistic approach to invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1996). At the core of inclusion is a democratic ethos where all people matter and need to be taught in such a manner that their individual needs are met. This is why I feel at home teaching in a constructivist manner. Finally, the principle of connection is in direct relationship to the key ingredients of invitational theory, which are care, trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality (Purkey & Novak). These core elements, when connected, offer a consistent “stance” through which I can continue to live attending to the mind, body, and spirit of those whom I teach. In essence, as a constructivist teacher, coming to invitational theory through the holistic door, gave me a solid theoretical foundation that broke down the theory/practice divide at the level of the self. This created the opportunity for a transformational moment to emerge, where real change had the potential to take place, and it did. The graduate student participants were able to apply invitational theory and in doing so create a more engaged and meaningful life for themselves. In short, becoming intentionally inviting opened the door to enhancing human existence. More than one participant stated that, “this course changed my life.” I am humbled by their words. As a guide I show, not tell with the hope that in the student’s own time they will adopt what they find sound and useful and apply it in their own lives in their own way. It seems that their time is now.

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