

# Journey to Authentic Learning: Enacting Reciprocity in Nursing Graduate Education

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## Abstract

The transformative experience of engaged presence in teaching and learning fosters trust and supports learners and teachers to explore, learn, and grow in their understanding of who they are becoming. Enacting presence in teaching becomes an act of care and creates an embodied space for learners to engage in authentic learning and to enter the realm of self-authorship. Self-authorship encourages the cultivation of one's internal voice to construct beliefs, identity, and social relationships in order to give up one way of making meaning to adopt a deeper meaning. Inspired by Martin Brokenleg and Adrienne Brant James, we engaged in a writing style that recognizes the iterative nature of knowledge creation. This reflective writing captures the essence of a Master of Nursing student's and two academic nurse educators' transformative learning as they journeyed together in relationship towards a deeper understanding of their Indigenous and Settler identities, and respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action.

**Keywords:** presence, authentic learning, self-authorship, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action, writing circle

## **Journey to Authentic Learning: Enacting Reciprocity in Nursing Graduate Education**

The transformative experience of engaged presence in teaching and learning fosters trust and supports learners and teachers to explore, learn, and grow in their understanding of who they are becoming. Enacting presence in teaching becomes an act of care and creates an embodied space for students to engage in authentic learning and enter the realm of self-authorship. Learning experiences that are personally relevant from the learners' perspective, and integrated into meaningful real life situations, represent opportunities to engage in authentic learning (Iucu & Marin, 2014). Self-authorship is a journey to encourage one's internal voice to construct beliefs, identity, and social relationships that enable them to give up one way of making meaning and to adopt a deeper meaning (Baxter-Magolda, 2009, 2014). Written as a dialogue, the authors, a Master of Nursing student, Sara, and two academic nurse educators, Tracey and Carla, recount their perspectives and reflections on the influence of presence and authentic learning in higher education. Highlighted in this circular conversation is Sara's journey to self-authorship and Tracey and Carla bearing witness to Sara's ongoing growth personally and professionally. Littlebear and the Canadian Council on Learning (2009) remind us that knowledge from an Indigenous perspective is not something contained in a book, but *is* the relationships.

### **Reflective Dialogue**

#### **Sara**

My name is Sara, a second-year Master of Nursing student in a Faculty of Nursing at a university in Western Canada. Originally, from Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, I am of mixed Métis and Settler heritage and I have been a registered nurse for 16 years. The decision to return to school came from a need for personal growth. I became a mother before becoming a nurse, and therefore I worked in a part time or casual employment capacity for most of my professional life. This afforded the opportunity

and flexibility in nursing to stay at home with my children for the majority of my nursing career. When my youngest of three children started elementary school, the timing was right for me to start reinvesting in my career and personal development. Returning to school was a significant risk for me. I felt vulnerable as a learner returning to school after being away for so long. I had to adapt to the fast pace of technology that was not present when I initially went to nursing school in the early 2000s. I was battling imposter syndrome (Parkman, 2016) in those first few weeks of school as a graduate student, fighting with a repeating inner commentary that I did not deserve to be in graduate school and that I was likely in over my head. Being a student in Tracey and Carla's class in my first term in the Master's program was an absolute blessing to me.

#### **Tracey and Carla**

On the first day of the Nurse as Educator course, we often begin with an introductory exercise that offers students, and ourselves as educators, the space and time to share our names and something personal about ourselves. We strive to create a warm welcome and to promote a sense of community that transcends the physical boundaries of a classroom. Garrison (2015) spoke about the dimension of community and asserted that "a connected community is essential to sustained inquiry and the potential to realize the benefits of thinking and learning collaboratively" (p. 54). As educators, we believe that we are stewards of the discipline and that the relationship we have with undergraduate and graduate nurses begins when they cross the threshold of any learning encounter. By honoring who we are and sharing a piece of ourselves with each other, we hope to extend a hospitable welcome to signal our belief that "Teaching therefore, asks first of all the creation of a space where students and teachers can enter into a fearless communication with each other" (Rud, 1995, p. 123).

We value authentic engagement and a relational approach within our pedagogical practice. To engage authentically is to be truly present and open to be in relationship. Nel

Noddings (2003) describes the caring relationship between teacher and students as ‘presence’, noting “I do not need to establish a lasting relationship with every student... What I must do is to be totally and non-selectively present to each student... the time interval may be brief but the encounter is total” (p. 180). In this space and time, presence, as described by Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006), is the awareness of bringing our whole selves as educators into the classroom where there is a certain level of responsiveness to the needs of the learners as well as the needs of the self as educator.

Emancipatory pedagogy for nursing as expressed by Hills and Watson (2011) is grounded within philosophical perspectives and theoretical frameworks that support the essence of a humanistic approach to caring education, serving as an embodied approach to teaching nursing. It has been defined as the transformation of consciousness through relational inquiry (Hills & Watson, 2011). The centrality of a caring relationship corresponds with Watson’s (2008) premise that Caring Science is foundationally a relational connectedness, an ethical ontology of “belonging as first principle” (Hills & Watson, 2011, p. 15). This ethical ontology supports a humanistic view of the relationship between the educator and the student, characterized by intersubjectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality (Létourneau et al., 2017).

### **Carla**

As a nurse educator, I recognize the knowledge and skills that I have accumulated through the years. Often privileged in academia, nurses’ years of experience is a main criterion to teach undergraduate nurses. Working with graduate students, however, presents a different landscape, as students may have equal or more years of nursing experience than me. Being in this situation helped me recognize my position as truly being the guide-on-the-side, as opposed to taking the traditional sage-on-the-stage approach to teaching and learning. Embodying this standpoint helps mitigate power differentials that are inherent in teacher-learner relationships and allows me to engage authentically and to

prioritize the relationship I have with others. As Labonte (1990) reminds us, “At its simplest, power is about choice” (p. 50).

### **Tracey**

An ethical consideration of my teaching practice begins by challenging an inherent assumption of equality in the student-teacher relationship. As an educator, I have social and ethical responsibilities to educate safe and competent nurses. The status of my educational role as assessor and evaluator of students’ knowledge and competency places legitimate constraints on equality within the student-teacher relationship. How I choose to embrace the relational connection with my students is through the lens of an egalitarian view of justice. By adopting the concept of equity, or fairness and justice within the student-teacher relationship, I recognize students’ personal power based on respect for their individuality, but I also acknowledge power imbalances. Within the student-teacher relationship, through acknowledging, articulating, and holding power differentials open and problematic, the limitations of power are revealed, and the possibilities of power are acknowledged. The primary quality that defines the ethics embodied within my educational practice is the acceptance of power imbalances within the connection between student and educator while advocating for equity within this relationship. Connecting with students through knowing, trust, respect, and equity does not diminish or negate the knowledge and responsibilities that I have as an educator; rather, it serves as an approach to fulfill my teaching responsibilities.

### **Tracey and Carla**

For educators and learners to be fully present and flourish within a caring relationship, there needs to be an acknowledgment of the influence of power differentials and how they shape authenticity and self-authorship. Chinn and Falk-Rafael (2018), in their consideration of a critical caring pedagogy within nursing education, discuss the importance of making power differentials explicit and engaging in “activities and interactions in which every voice is heard, and every individual is valued” (p.

691). Hills and Watson (2011) challenge us to reframe our understanding of power within a culture of caring as “having *power with*” (p. 130) rather than *power over*. It is not enough to acknowledge power simply. As human beings, nurses, and nurse educators, we have a moral obligation to respond within our practice and to engage with learners in ways that reflect both “the intention and the outcome of learning experiences...[as] praxis, empowerment, awareness, cooperation, and evolvment” or PEACE (Chinn & Falk-Rafael, 2018, p. 691). As educators, we have a choice about how to use our power. We chose to embrace a relationship with Sara that recognized her humanness in addition to our own and extended an invitation for Sara to honour and give voice to who she is and who she is becoming. Within this context, “the power that leads us to our humanness is infinite...the more of this type of power we share, the more we have returned to us” (Hills & Watson, 2011, p. 130).

### Sara

My experience of engagement with Tracey and Carla was that their use of presence in teaching fostered trust and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) for me. Their approach supported me to take the risk of exploring and growing in my understanding of who I am as an educator. Through weekly dialogue in class, and upon reflection for written assignments, I slowly began to listen to and use my voice. It was through the dedication of presence in my educators that I was able to experience the rich benefits of authentic and meaningful learning for me within my life context.

Individuals have unique social locations within society that are based on what is valued by the culture, resulting in varying social privileges (Kubiak, 2005). Further, social locations consider the multiple, intersecting social identities that one possesses and how those intersecting identities form, and are viewed, within the larger social structure (Kubiak, 2005; Wortham, 2004). This concept reflects the subtleties of how individuals are positioned in society, looking beyond usual

social determinants such as income (Kubiak, 2005). Upon reflection of my own social location, Carla and Tracey bolstered my perceived positionality by creating time and space to convey respect and to actively listen to me through presence. Tracey and Carla were intentional in their interactions with me as a graduate student. They chose to enact mentorship and role modeling through relationship building. With Tracey and Carla working as a team, both committed to lifelong learning, they choose to use the power that came with their roles to ignite a dialogue that was larger than themselves. They recognized the potential of working together with learners. Interestingly, both the role modeling and the non-competitiveness that Tracey and Carla demonstrated in their roles as educators, as opposed to more authoritarian methods of *power over* students, are highlighted in common Indigenous ethics (Brant, 1990). For me, this method demonstrates a more decolonized approach to graduate education.

Based on my background in acute inpatient nephrology, my initial focus in graduate school was on better supporting inpatients managing diabetes. It did not take long for my focus to shift, though, once I attended a few of the presentations offered through the Faculty’s Indigenous Initiative. I could not ignore the Institute’s content on colonialism and contemporary Indigenous issues. After discussions with my supervisor, along with Tracey and Carla, I kept my focus on diabetes; however, I shifted this focus by leveraging my personal and professional experience to respond to the 18th and 19th Calls to Action outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) (2015) for healthcare providers. These Calls to Action highlight our responsibility as healthcare providers to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples in Canada are not vulnerable, nor is their pathologization justified. Rather, Indigenous peoples in Canada still suffer from the effects of colonialism today, including increased prevalence and severity of chronic illness in this population. Further, healthcare providers have been called to actively work towards eliminating the marginalizing conditions (Ford-Gilboe et al.,

2018; Krieger, 2012) that Indigenous peoples face as a result of colonization. Overall, I experienced transformative learning in my first term in graduate school. I shifted the focus of my graduate studies—but more than that, as my learning progressed, I began to shift my own self-identity.

### **Tracey and Carla**

Our ongoing conversations with Sara were aimed at making her learning meaningful within the context of her graduate studies. Through this process, she began to express a new sense of purpose relative to her focus. Although there was vulnerability, Sara embraced the opportunity to present in class, where her fledgling ideas related to peer mentorship among Indigenous peoples living with diabetes. During her presentation, we began to see and hear a quiet and steadfast confidence grow in Sara. The origin of the word ‘liminal’ extends from the Latin root, *limen*, which translates as ‘threshold’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Although she never vocalized a shift in her own self-identity, we were witness to Sara crossing a threshold and entering a space of transformation.

Sara’s authentic learning became a process of reshaping her subjective knowing in a way that embodied a conceptual and an ontological shift (Land, Rattray, & Vivian, 2014). As her learning progressed, Sara became critically aware of her own understanding of reality, self-consciously participating in an ongoing dialogue toward truth, and cultivating a capacity to respond, to act, in ways that were just and that honoured who she is. Parks (2000) would remind us that these perspectives reveal the complexity and courage that it takes to transform how one understands and makes meaning of their learning. Sara was journeying toward self-authorship.

### **Sara**

For my final assignment in the ‘Nurse as Educator’ class, which was taught by Tracey and Carla, I created a conceptual framework to represent my teaching philosophy (see Appendix A). I was inspired to visualize my teaching philosophy through a medicine wheel as a

celebration of Indigenous knowledge. I wanted to celebrate a part of me that I had not celebrated before. I was inspired when Carla enacted vulnerability in our class by sharing a conceptual framework she created as a celebration of her Filipino heritage. It was an opportunity for me to use my artistic side to visualize the learning I had gained throughout the term. The conceptual framework has two perspectives. One is the educator’s role over the seasons of the learner/educator relationship. The second perspective represents Erikson’s (1993) adult psychosocial development stages, to remind me of the adult learner’s readiness and motivations to learn throughout different seasons of adulthood. Erikson reportedly interacted with the Lakota and Yurok Nations in the United States while formulating his developmental stages (Brokenleg & James, 2013), which makes this perspective even more meaningful to me. In my conceptual framework, the season of spring represents a spirit of belonging, and the beginning of the educator-learner relationship. In the context of a core value of belonging, guided discovery enables the educator to sow the seeds of psychological safety for authentic learning. Through cultivating a spirit of growth, knowledge germinates within the season of summer, reminding me that learners are unique in their learning style preferences and motivations to learn. Autumn brings a spirit of clarity. Through learners’ reflection on the transformation that has occurred inside them, knowledge emerges in a form that was not visible to them before their learning process. Finally, winter evokes a spirit of becoming and reciprocity through sharing knowledge gained in the form of mentorship, role modeling, questioning, and circling back around to the season of spring, beginning the learning process over again. The teaching and learning represented within my framework led to deep, authentic learning and self-discovery.

### **Carla**

I clearly remember the day when I shared a little bit more about myself to help the students understand how to begin developing a teaching philosophy. Since this was the fifth time that Tracey and I co-taught the Nurse as

Educator course, and co-teaching has been a critical component of this course, this time I created an example to visually represent these ideas. Specifically, I created a short video clip comprised of a collection of photos, each with an accompanying word to provide some context. I was inspired to make linkages between the values that Tracey and I held when engaging in a co-teaching relationship, and the Filipino ways of living that I have come to know and value. I used images that displayed my Filipino heritage: *mano*, a gesture that represents the respect I have for my co-teacher; *bayanihan*, to depict the notion of community that Tracey has provided to me through her mentorship; and popular sites in the Philippines (i.e., the Chocolate Hills of Bohol and the Banawe Rice Terraces) to represent a sense of wonder and growth which our co-teaching relationship fostered within me. Unseen by the others watching this short clip with me was my desire, precipitated by my grandfather's ailing health, to remember where I come from. Upon reflection, this was my way of lamenting the loss of my Filipino ways.

### Sara

I did not grow up with medicine wheels in my family. In fact, little time was spent discussing Indigenous knowledge explicitly when I was growing up, even though I was raised in a Métis home. Instead, when I used the image of a medicine wheel in developing my teaching philosophy, my intention was to start by highlighting common Indigenous values that so many Indigenous families had taken from them, or were shamed out of celebrating, due to colonialism. In choosing photos, I focused on circular and cyclical themes, reciprocity in learning, and relationalism, including celebrating my experiences of connection to the earth. In a contemporary context, I wanted to highlight the importance of being connected to the land in my own way. The picture of hands delicately holding a small plant is a picture of my oldest daughter carefully holding a small plant from our garden with its roots intact. To me, this photo symbolizes a decolonized approach to education. It reminds me of why the approach of trying to remove learners' existing roots by

creating new ones does not succeed, and that we need to handle learners' existing roots with care and to encourage their growth, including supporting authentic awareness of self-identity.

I did not come to school to learn more about my Indigeneity; however, returning to school has been a journey of self-discovery and an unexpected immersion in Indigenous culture. Moreover, it has been a journey of discovery into Canada's colonial legacy and how it has affected my family. Being at school has enhanced my awareness of Indigenous history and knowledge and deepened my learning about how it applies to me both personally and as a nurse. It has become impossible to ignore the marginalizing conditions of Indigenous peoples across Canada. The more I learn, the more I position myself and my nursing practice in a place of hopeful reconciliation. Engaging in authentic learning afforded me the space to begin celebrating this part of my heritage and provided enhanced direction for my professional life.

### Tracey and Carla

Sara's teaching philosophy became a creative expression of her authentic learning and transformed understanding of her self-identity. The visuals and language clearly spoke to her Indigenous heritage. Self-authorship was evident in Sara's commitment to respond to her deep learning and acknowledge the necessity of shifting her Master's program focus in response to the TRCC's (2015) Calls to Action for healthcare providers. Shultz (2003) placed listening at the heart of what it means to teach, defining listening as "an active, relational, and interpretive process that is focused on making meaning" (p. 8). Attending to, and responding with, intentionality "implies becoming deeply engaged in understanding what a person has to say through words, gesture, and action. Listening is fundamentally about being in relationship to another, and through this relationship supporting change or transformation" (Shultz, 2003, p. 9). Upon reading Sara's teaching philosophy, we were drawn into her poignant expression of the importance of honoring Indigenous ways of knowing and being. We experienced a "slow

motion awareness and wide-open acceptance [of Sara] that is free of judgement and filled with awe of her capacity to learn” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 271).

Presence to the spoken, and unspoken, drew us in and in the quiet, there was complete attentiveness. We were listening with our hearts. Heshusius (1995) would describe this experience of listening as “a sense of opening up...The self is forgotten; there is no ‘I’ with whom I am preoccupied or who is judging...I become something larger than myself” (p. 118). Sara’s transformation became our transformation. Being present and creating spaces for transformative learning and self-authorship requires educators themselves to remain open to the unknown (Bach & Alexander, 2015). A pedagogy of witness calls for teachers “themselves to learn to be comfortable with ‘holding’ uncomfortable emotions, our own and those of our students, in an atmosphere of inquiry and loving kindness” (Baugher, 2014, p. 236). Along with Sara’s realization of her role in following the principles of reconciliation (TRCC, 2015), there was a keen awareness of our own need to respond.

### Tracey

In an emancipatory pedagogical approach, the concept of praxis is significant, where praxis is seen as “a reflexive relationship in which both action and reflection build on one another” (Hills & Watson, 2011, p. 60). My awareness of our need to follow the principles of reconciliation (TRCC, 2015) led to the dawning realization of my own social location as a Settler Canadian (Zatsman, 2016). Identifying myself using the language of Settler began to reframe my perceptions and knowledge of self in relation to the world around me. This subtle shift in thinking became a place to engage in a deeper reflection and embodied awareness of how my Settler identity and privilege profoundly influences my ‘being’ and consequently my ‘doing’ as a nurse educator. I experienced an added dimension of understanding, a critical consciousness associated with my presence in relation to both Sara and Carla, and the moral imperative of self (Heron & Reasons, 1997;

Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). I am profoundly aware that “presence, in the end, is not neutral, nor is it bounded by the persons of teacher and student, but reaches toward and is grounded in such a moral imperative” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 273). Emancipatory relational pedagogy calls us as educators and as students to co-create mutually understood meanings and “to be critical agents in the act of knowing” (Hills & Watson, 2011, p. 74). As we supported Sara to embrace a way of knowing and being that was authentically her own, the process took on a deeper meaning—a recognition of my own role and responsibility as a person, as a nurse, and as a nurse educator to remain open to transforming my understanding relative to the influence of my identity as a Settler.

### Sara

As a student, I have high regard for the nursing and teaching experience that Tracey and Carla possess, and, as such, there has been a professional power differential between us. However, without this experience, I would not have learned the valuable application of nursing pedagogies and theories that have helped inform my own practice as a nurse educator. Furthermore, as role models, they have taught me so much through our various collaborative projects. The relationship between Tracey, Carla and myself has evolved from educator-learner in the classroom to that of mentor-mentee in our work as collaborators. I have become passionate about my own learning path and they continue to learn and grow in their respective areas of interest, both currently pursuing a doctoral degree. Because of this experience, we each have an authentic and unique perspective that we respect and value, demonstrating reciprocity with our knowledge (Brokenleg & James, 2013). As a group, we ensured that each of us had a voice in writing this manuscript. Having more experience with scholarly publications and presentations, Tracey and Carla have led us through the submission process, with their scholarly publication and presentation experience, thus, enacting role modeling and mentorship for me again. However, because this writing is about transformations that I experienced as a learner, I took the lead in

formatting this reflective dialogue and initiated the writing circle. Tracey, Carla, and I allowed each other to write our own words and share our own thoughts, acknowledging each of us as experts of our own transformative experience. In nursing practice, this respect and *power with* approach should be enacted in daily interactions with clients as well, as they are experts of their lived experience and need to be valued as such.

### **Tracey and Carla**

Our process began with the intent to celebrate Sara's learning; however, this process has evolved to become a shared journey to authentic learning and a deep appreciation for the true transformative potential of relationship and reciprocity between and among Indigenous and Settler women, nurses, educators, and learners. Engaging from a place of openness fosters the ability to remain open to what is, freeing the mind to see everything as it is, here and now (Waks, 1995). Acceptance of self and others creates a space of "openness as a necessary condition for compassionate interaction" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 269). "Learning is fostered in a climate that embraces flexibility, dialogue, and deep reflection, as well as authentic caring and respect for each person's unique capacity for meaning-making, self-discovery, and knowledge creation" (Hills & Watson, 2011, p. 188). The communal knowing from our praxis dialogue transcends a search for meaning as the purpose of education and, instead, informs education as "ethical

action" (Hills & Watson, 2011, p. 60).

### **Sara**

In Baxter-Magolda (2009), Sharon Daloz Parks captures how presence in teaching can have rippling effects well beyond the classroom, stating that "if any one of us fails to speak in our authentic voice - our self-authored voice - something vital for our collective life that can only come through us will be lost - missing from the conversation that is now ended" (p. xviii). I want to encourage educators and learners in higher education to be brave and to speak in and present their authentic voices in their learning and teaching through presence, vulnerability, and in celebrating self-identity. The potential that arises from the reciprocity of educators and learners coming together to co-create deeper learning and personal growth is limitless.

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This work is a mutually agreed upon collaboration between a graduate student and her two co-teachers following the completion of a course she was taking. Ethical permissions were not required.



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Appendix A

Teaching Philosophy Conceptual Framework, Scott (2018)

