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# The Edge of Counselling: Mindful Negotiation of Emotions Towards Transforming Learning-Teaching

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**The Edge of Counselling:  
Mindful Negotiation of Emotions Towards Transforming Learning~Teaching**

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Abstract

Learning and learner environments are enmeshed with a vast range of emotion, yet schools are set up for teachers to focus primarily on curriculum delivery, often relegating emotional terrain to the counsellor down the hall. We explore teacher engagement with emotion (both their own and that of learners) through the lens of Transformative Inquiry (TI), a dialogic, reflexive, relational and mindful approach to learning to teach. Building on data of TI mentoring sessions between pre-service teachers and their instructors, we consider the *edge of counselling*, a place where the worlds of teaching and therapeutic involvement overlap. Our perspective as educators is enhanced through the inclusion of a transpersonal psychologist during the data analysis. We discuss how: emotions are often inadequately understood, acknowledged, and discussed within a professional teaching practice; practicing careful discernment supports the negotiation of emotional terrain, shared and courageous vulnerability facilitates emotional engagement; mindful intention supports navigation of the edge of counselling; and emotions can act as beneficial catalysts towards transformation.



added to this particular list (after prompting from the instructor) were math and delivery of the curriculum.

Four things are noteworthy about this collection of concerns. First, similar lists have been created in multiple TI classrooms, indicating that our pre-service teachers are aware of the complexity and have significant wonderings around how to engage in these topics as teachers. Second, it is typical that the concerns that are first expressed are not around curriculum delivery as much as the intricate elements that compose classroom dynamics. Third, our pre-service teachers want to avoid falling into, what our team member Maureen (a retired principal and educator) called the 3Bs: bitterness, blaming and burning-out. Fourth, all of the unearthed topics are tethered in some way to emotions, be that of the learner or the teacher.

All of these points are interrelated, but it is the last point that is the particular focus of this paper, as there is much uncertainty amongst our students as to how to handle emotions in the classroom. We refer to this unfamiliar affective terrain as the edge of counselling where the fields of teaching and therapy overlap and the way forward is often ambiguous and unfamiliar. We base our discussion in five salient qualities. First, that emotions are often inadequately understood, acknowledged, and discussed within a professional teaching practice. Three valuable qualities need attention in this context: practicing careful discernment, shared and courageous vulnerability and mindful intention. These support navigation of the edge of counseling leading to a fifth quality where emotions can act as beneficial catalysts towards transformation.

### **Transformative Inquiry**

The TI approach is the exclusive focus and practice of a required course in the teacher education program at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Students begin the course

by connecting with their “path with heart” (Chambers, 2004) as they each unearth salient issues about which they are personally and professionally passionate. Typically, they choose topics relevant to the context of their own teaching practice and therefore, topics that also matter to other educators. Many of the topics in Figure 1 become starting points for their TI journeys. Within their inquiry, these pre-service teachers are encouraged to explore open-ended, or “unbounded” questions (Henderson, 1992) and to follow where the inquiry takes them, rather than looking for prescribed outcomes or a final product. They spend the course investigating their ideas reflexively and relationally within larger educational and sociocultural contexts. The TI process is difficult to explain, so we embed examples below in order to better illustrate (or see Tanaka, 2014 for further description).

In the context of TI, we believe that teachers are transformers within their classrooms. We extend this notion to include teachers as transforming as well; as we engage with our students, we are also changed. Our view assumes a type of reciprocity between learning and teaching, hence we often refer to pre-service teachers as learner~teacher~researchers as they concurrently engage in learning, teaching and researching. Additionally, we believe that all educators are in the state of be~coming; both being teachers and becoming teachers simultaneously. We use a tilde between these terms, and others in our writing, to demonstrate the fluidity and mutual reciprocity of these concepts. TI offers an approach that develops teacher capacity by relying heavily on the transfer of control from instructor to learner, thus engaging in what Freire termed the “death of the professor” (p. 20 in Vella, 2002). Indeed, dispositional transformation is key as we work towards changing the internalized social norms that beget traditional methods of learning and teaching.

While many teacher educators strive to move teacher training into a more transformative space, the inherited positivism and transmissive practice of teacher as ‘sage on the stage’ in large part goes woefully unquestioned by pre-service teachers. This is not out of an absence of concern or recognition, rather there is a lack of genuine opportunity and a purposeful space to consider educational intention; the reasons we are educators, and what matters for our learners. The TI course offers time and space for such explorations.

Like many of our colleagues, we support inquiry as a means for pre-service teachers to address their concerns and develop their practice. The TI approach builds on a conventional understanding of inquiry advanced by Kalmbach Philips and Carr (2006), Fichtman Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009), Clarke and Erickson (2003), and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). In TI, we focus carefully on concepts such as disrupting binaries (Kumashiro, 2004), nourishing the learning spirit (Battiste, 2009), touchstone stories (Strong-Wilson, 2008; Tanaka, 2011), layered and generous listening (Schultz, 2003; Thayer-Bacon, 2003), relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), mindfulness (Nhat Hanh, 1992), accessing other ways of knowing (Snowber, 2012) and emotional engagement (Rosenberg, 2003). This is done with the overarching intent of acting differently as teachers and transforming our practice.

TI is a process aimed at increasing pre-service teachers’ capacity to negotiate the complexities of today’s diverse classrooms and is characterized by a motivation to delve into liminal and non-discrete spaces, such as those between the personal and professional, the curriculum-as-planned and the curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 2005), and the overlapping worlds of teaching and therapeutic endeavors. We strive to help pre-service teachers find the ideas that intrigue, unsettle or discomfort them, the questions that niggle and worry in the background of their teaching. TI allows time and space to examine the vexing issues, ideas and complexities

born out of direct experience in the classroom or related to the classroom, but that do not dwell in the neat boxes of understanding that schooling tends to promote.

TI aims to avoid falling into routine and perfunctory practice, and to resist blaming others when the tools in the toolbox fail to provide anticipated results. To cultivate the responsive and flexible kinds of practitioners that education practice demands, pre-service teachers need experience living with and adapting to the uncertainty that arises from the complexity of teaching practice. The process of TI helps to render the familiar strange (Greene, 1995) and to think in fresh ways about questions and ideas which often seem routine, comfortable, and proverbial (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000).

Critical to facilitating the process of TI is a mentoring relationship that develops between the course instructor and each pre-service teacher. Building upon trust and addressing poignant issues identified by the mentee around be~coming a teacher, the instructor offers guidance, encouragement, and pragmatic assistance (Clutterbuck, 2001) towards negotiating this unfamiliar terrain. The instructor supports the TI process in numerous ways including: modeling the TI process by sharing personal inquiry journeys, building awareness of institutional structures and power dynamics, suggesting students pay attention to those they are thinking with, and examining the dispositional lens through which they see the world.

### **Research Team and Approach**

The TI process offered in the course is currently the focus of a 3-year study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Within this project, members of a diverse and collaborative community of teacher educators, teachers, and pre-service teachers are exploring TI to better articulate the complex and imprecise process, to improve the course, and to

find ways of expanding TI into the large educational context. The authors of his paper are a subset of this group. Over the past two years, data has been gathered from over 200 participants in the form of transcribed mentor~mentee sessions, student, instructor and researcher reflexive pieces (incorporating images and writing) and post-course focus groups and surveys.

Overarching project questions include: (i) dispositional development (In what ways does participating in the inquiry and mentoring process influence disposition?); (ii) self-directed topic emergence (How does utilizing a personally emergent inquiry topic affect professional inquiry development? How does mentoring assist this?); (iii) reflexivity (In what ways does reflexivity influence a deepening of the Transformative Inquiry approach? What is difficult about reflexivity?); (iv) relational accountability (How do mentor expectations towards relational accountability affect the process? What effect does partnering with peers have?); and (v) teacher efficacy (How does using a Transformative Inquiry approach shape teaching ability?). These research questions are related to existing theoretical perspectives on such matters including adult dialogue (Vella, 2002), living inquiry (Meyer, 2008), organic inquiry (Curry & Wells, 2006), and research as ceremony (Wilson, 2008).

This paper however, takes a different direction based in findings derived from the data. Our intention here is to further understand the often subtle and intuitive characteristics of the edge of counselling. Specifically we ask: What does emotional engagement look like within the TI course? How do instructors deal appropriately with these emotions? And, building on previous work (see Tanaka, Nichols & Farish, 2011), how might emotions be entry points into transformation? To this aim, we draw on two data sources in particular; significant transcripts from mentoring sessions, and researcher reflexive pieces that highlight emotional engagement.

Initially, the mentoring session data led us to the belief that the instinctual space of emotional engagement is critical in the development of TI; acknowledging and ‘listening’ to what occurs here becomes transformational. This space however, is vague and fluid, difficult to understand and define. Because of this, we asked Indrus, a registered clinical counsellor who specializes in transpersonal psychology to join our discussion and analysis. She familiarized herself with the data, and then facilitated a daylong workshop for us to further analyze the edge of counselling.

In the workshop we considered numerous mentoring sessions from the data where heightened emotions were present. We discussed each example from the instructors’ viewpoint, highlighting places where we felt uncomfortable with the emotion and/or unsure that the instructor had handled the situation in the best way. We began to wonder about the places where teaching and counselling interact and how to best attend to these delicate situations. While the instructors in TI do not intentionally act as counsellors, often their role becomes blurred as they facilitate meaningful conversations, and must negotiate vulnerable and emotionally laden spaces. As we spoke, Indrus interlaced comments into the conversation from her perspective and later elaborated on what transpersonal psychology might offer to these scenarios.

As a team, we left this workshop energized and exhausted. We had a collective feeling that we had uncovered a portion of a topic that needed further consideration. In particular, we realized that we had diverse perspectives around the edge of counselling, and that articulating these would be useful in order to draw out better understanding. As a follow-up activity we each wrote reflexively around the prompt: To me, the edge of counselling... This writing was informed by our involvement in the data analysis discussions over the past year and a half and our own lived experience with the TI process either as instructors or students in the course.

Our thinking here was to apply a reflexive technique through a common writing activity, where attention was turned onto us as researchers as an integral part of the social phenomenon being studied (Ahern, 1999). Our assumptions, beliefs and feelings around the edge of counselling were carefully described and acknowledged in order to make more tangible “the complicated interconnections between the topic of [our] gaze, and [our] ideas, values and beliefs, as well as the feelings [we attach] to each of these” (Chambers, 2004, p. 2). Our knowledge as researchers was considered as a valuable source of data (Oberg, 1989), and to provide veracity this knowledge has been recursively examined and contextualized for relational accountability within the broader context of researchers, scholars, practitioners, artists, and thinkers who also engage with the topic (Chambers, 2004; Wilson, 2008).

After our initial writing around the prompt, we each read our piece aloud in a research team meeting, gave written feedback around what we heard as we listened to each other, and then each person made revisions to their own writing as they saw fit. Due to the complexity of the edge of counselling, it is important to notice that some of us reacted to the prompt through an interpretive exploration and others through a descriptive one. After each team member felt comfortable they had expressed their beliefs accurately, we carefully reread and discussed the responses, identifying salient qualities of the mentor~mentee relationship. Based in our combined experience and identification of resonant ideas arising from the prompt, we find the following qualities to be useful in further understanding of the edge of counseling. These qualities exist in a fluid Aokian space. For instance, instructors listen carefully for what each pre-service teacher is negotiating and finds appropriate learning opportunities from there. Table 1 identifies the qualities and provides contextual description as they relate to the practice of teaching.

Quality	Context
Emotions are often inadequately understood, acknowledged, and discussed within a professional teaching practice	Cultural norm dominating the professional teaching environments of North America
Practicing careful discernment supports the negotiation of emotional terrain	A practice that values and encourages emotional engagement
Shared and courageous vulnerability facilitates emotional engagement	A practice that values and encourages emotional engagement
Mindful intention support navigation of the edge of counselling	A practice that values and encourages emotional engagement
Emotions can act as beneficial catalysts towards transformation and for us as a research team	An outcome of integrating the above qualities that augments the cultural norm of disengagement with emotions

Table 1. Five qualities and their contextual descriptions ascertained through resonant analysis of the responses to the prompt, “to me the edge of counseling...”

The first of these qualities is indicative of the muddled cultural norm around emotions within the teaching profession. Poor attention to emotions creates a kind of fog where there is confusion around what is and is not part of the teacher job description. Hence, a boundary can be created between what aspects of the educational experience a teacher is willing to attend to. This boundary can vary from person to person, but it is within this fog that we find the edge of

counselling. The next three qualities, practicing careful discernment, shared and courageous vulnerability, and mindful intention, are characteristics of the edge of counselling that when harmoniously integrated, support the final quality to emerge, as emotions become catalysts for transformation.

### **The Edge of Counselling**

Before further examining the five qualities, we share two vignettes that give a sense of the emotional predicaments that arise within the mentoring process. The first describes a situation where the emotion present was a missed opportunity; the second portrays emotions that override the purpose of the course. These are common examples that might show up in any given group of students. We are highlighting them not because they are unusual, but because they exemplify some of the issues that concern us at the edge of counselling.

#### **Olivia<sup>1</sup> and instructor 1: What's good about my kid?**

Olivia's inquiry revolved around a concern over clutter in the classroom; she asked, "How does the aesthetic dimension of space in the classroom affect teachers and students?" As Olivia discussed this topic with Instructor 1, a seemingly unrelated story from her practicum also surfaced. An upset mother had confronted Olivia and her mentor teacher after being hammered with a list of problematic behaviours exhibited by her child that day. In response, the mother simply asked: "What's good about my kid?" Neither the mentor teacher nor Olivia was able to offer a response. The awkward silence of this incident stayed with Olivia and it was significant

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<sup>1</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms.

enough that she raised it two different times during the mentoring session. Instructor 1 however, did not pursue further discussion around it.

**Amanda and instructor 2: Adrenaline junky.**

Amanda's inquiry began by trying to understand a fretful child in her class. She wondered, "What can I do for children with anxiety?" In her sessions with Instructor 2, Amanda quickly began to discuss her own experiences of anxiety, posing the question, "What happens to adults who are unidentified?" She spent much of the mentoring time describing her personal stories in great detail. Instructor 2 encouraged Amanda to share and did not interrupt or redirect her focus. Subsequent mentoring session continued to concentrate primarily on Amanda's personal stories. Amanda later wrote that she liked the attention she was getting from sharing in this way, "I came to the conclusion that I am an adrenaline junky. I love the high. It is like riding a roller coaster when I have anxiety."

These vignettes are examples of the kinds of issues that can come up in the mentoring sessions. What follows is a weaving of these stories into the five qualities derived from our team's reflexive writing with different possibilities highlighted. Note that the long quotes are excerpts from each of the authors' response to the prompt: *To me the edge of counselling...*

**Quality One: Emotions Are Often Poorly Understood, Acknowledged, and Discussed within a Professional Teaching Practice**

For many of our participants, dealing with emotional terrain in the classroom felt uncomfortable and was often avoided. Many expressed the belief that being a counsellor is a separate job from that of teacher and believed they have a lack of expertise with emotions. Yet,

emotions are present in every classroom and each learning environment. The above vignettes give examples of this phenomenon within the TI process, and Lisa grappled with this issue:

[I am aware of] the power I possess in my role as mentor and [sometimes] I question if I even know what to do with that power. I know many [of my] students have deeply personal touchstone stories that they want/need/should explore because such exploration will open space for them to become more of who they want to be... How do I support them in doing so without letting go too soon or pushing them too far? How did I get in the way of [each student's] story? Did I validate [their] experience, diminish it? Do I really care about these stories?

Maureen emphasized this point, “As a person with no formal training in counselling, the pressure to deal with moments of emotional vulnerability correctly sometimes creates anxiety and insecurity for me as an instructor.”

Lisa's musings indicate how the edge of counselling can be an uncomfortable space for the instructor as well as the mentee. Lisa also sheds light on how Instructor 1 may have been feeling around using a distraught mother's comment as an entry point into inquiry. When we are of the mindset that counselling is not our job as teachers, why should we care about these stories? Why would we want to go there if our job is focused on curriculum delivery?

Of course, amidst the fog, teaching is also considered a caring or humanizing profession (Noddings, 2013; Bartolome, 1994). Attending to the edge of counselling helps us to reimagine pedagogical possibilities so that emotional engagement becomes an integral part of our practice. Vanessa, past TI student and team member, depicted her understanding of the edge of counselling through the following poem, which works to disrupt the image of a teacher as a

knowledge disseminator and looks instead to the development of a disposition more mindful of underlying emotions in the classroom.

*The bell*

The busy bell clatters on,

It has no time to rest.

It is too busy filling minds

With syntax, spelling and correctness.

Shh! Hush! Sit! Stop!

Don't you know the rules?

Mine is the only voice that counts,

So stop that shouting you fools!

When I say listen,

You better know that means obey.

Criss-cross-applesauce on the carpet

And (for heaven's sakes) put those jellybeans away!

The mob of desks draws closer

The bell strains every chord

To lift up the blessed answer

To tame again, the teaming hoard.

School bells are made for ringing  
No ears formed on its smooth head.  
What might it hear in those voices  
That pound out printing in gray lead?

The toolkit grows heavy,  
No rubric, strategy or scale  
Can comfort a child grieving  
Or fill the heart's lunch pail.

What is this way of listening  
That a school bell could never know?  
It searches between questions  
Beholds breathing, wonder, flow.

Where are the grown-ups  
Who are present before a child?  
Leaning into the cracks of counsel,  
Cherishing the silly, scared and wild.

Where no stories are too small,  
No voice too shrill or simple  
Not to know the burning hold of suffering

That leaves no hand unwrinkled.

The bell is not trained

To help those whose parents will divorce

Or assist the child, whose meds,

Will not stay on their course.

In the textbook for teaching

There are no cracks, clamor or distress.

Theory, after all, is perfect,

But life – an elegant mess.

Teetering on the edge,

Written slightly off the page

Are the notes we place ourselves

As we stumble from the cage.

Vanessa attempts to make explicit the taken for granted realm of emotions in teaching and illuminates the importance of attending to the emotional layer that is present in every learning environment. Like the school bell, teachers are not always able to listen to the underlying emotional needs of learners. While good educators are upheld as caring individuals, teacher education paradoxically provides little training to assist teachers in negotiating

emotionally laden spaces. Placing value on the next three qualities counteracts this fog of emotional disengagement.

### **Quality Two: Practicing Careful Discernment Supports the Negotiation of Emotional Terrain**

It is important to recognize the human and ordinary nature of emotional engagement, as Michele highlighted, “I have walked with family and friends down similar paths. Aren’t we all counsellors at some point in time?” Emotions do not suddenly emerge in learning-teaching, but rather, emotions are part of the very fabric of lived experiences. Nick described that, “The edge of counselling in a classroom is not intentionally therapeutic or steeped in the praxis of psychological or psychiatric methodologies.” The edge of counselling is present in ordinary learning contexts; hence it is essential for teachers to hone their discernment skills. We do not perceive the edge of counseling as “bringing emotions in” but attending to *what is already there*. This reality merits more time and space for educators to understand their role around the nuances of emotional engagement. Discernment and instinct are embedded in this process and are vital to guiding students forward in their inquiry journeys.

Discernment is a form of insight, a sensitive careful judgment, which requires reading between the lines, a deep knowledge of emotions, and the ability to keep the big picture in mind. It is something that is continually practiced and is by no means a fixed trait. Married to discernment is instinct, powerful impulses based in feelings rather than reason. Often, instinct acts as a trigger for instructors during mentoring sessions and discernment leads them forward in negotiating particularly emotional landscapes.

The mentoring vignettes help to elucidate the complex intersection of discernment and instinct. With Olivia there was an intuitive opportunity missed, in which Instructor 1 did not sense the emotional importance of the touchstone story related to the mother's question. In the case of Amanda and Instructor 2, time and energy were being usurped by recursive emotional engagement. Increased discernment around the purpose of the course would have been useful to break this pattern. Instructor 2 perhaps became *too* good at listening, allowing Amanda to remain stuck in personal analysis, thus distracting them from the task at hand. The course is a place to explore the burning issues we face as educators and we remind our students that they may be the *site* for their topic, but they are not the focus of their inquiry (Chambers, 2004).

As Meaghan, former TI student and team member wrote, "The edge of counselling requires a balance of sharing and listening (to oneself and another); it requires us to use discernment around where our topics and questions lead us." Instructor 2 held a compassionate instinct to care for Amanda without the discernment to fully enact the intention of the course. What might have unfolded if she had been able to ask: What does your circumstance mean for you as a teacher? What is an appropriate level of disclosure in a professional context? What options do you have for receiving further appropriate support with your personal issues?

### **Quality Three: Shared and Courageous Vulnerability Facilitates Emotional Engagement**

In TI, it is not required for students to engage emotionally, but often, as Maureen articulated, this occurs organically "in that moment when a student consciously or unconsciously drops her shield of emotional control and becomes vulnerable". When deep emotion is exposed, this vulnerability can easily be swept under the rug or avoided. Conversely, through shared and courageous practices, the mentor and mentee can choose to explore vulnerable spaces. The word

courage originates from the Latin word *cor* which means heart. In TI, we proceed with the intention of following our path with heart, and this often requires us to engage courageously.

TI instructors try to exemplify that “to teach is to be vulnerable” (Bullough, 2005, p. 23) and often share their own experiences of vulnerability. Students are more likely to engage emotionally in their topics when instructors walk alongside them in this type of heartfelt way. Nick wrote:

The edge of counselling exists in the territory of emotions, spirits, intuitions, and hearts, where students and teachers are compelled to share personal truths with each other that engage and acknowledge the authentic human-ness of this practice of teaching.

Within these authentic and humane spaces, we engage more honestly around important, complicated and sometimes controversial topics. A space is created where both mentor and mentee can courageously move “toward a shared vulnerability – by being open about our fears, doubts, questions, and struggles – we invite our students to share their vulnerabilities too,” (Oyler & Becker, 1997, p. 464).

If Olivia and Instructor 1 had been able to pursue the lack of response to the mother’s comment, it would have put both into more vulnerable terrain. Instead, Olivia’s fascination with clutter and Instructor 1’s concordance with this direction resulted in a missed opportunity. The student’s disruptive behavior clouded Olivia’s ability recognize the positive attributes of this child, which was an uncomfortable subject that was left unattended. Addressing the issues around the question, “What’s good about my kid?” requires going into spaces of potential shame and vulnerability – a difficult task, not typically asked of pre-service teachers. This work requires the act of holding gently, attending carefully without judging or trying to fix.

On the other hand, Instructor 2 became distracted as she followed Amanda into her emotions. As they became caught in the whirlpool of personal stories, they missed the opportunity to pursue a more meaningful inquiry. Concordantly, in her response to the prompt, Maureen commented, “We dare not open the door for our students into this murky territory without having a contingency plan in place.” In fact, after analysis of these data, new protocol was added to the course. Now, at the beginning of each term, appropriate parameters around the edge of counselling are discussed and contact information for campus and private counselling options are distributed to all students.

When the right balance is established, practicing shared and courageous vulnerability sets a stage of trust and compassion, and the edge of counselling is more easily navigated. The instructor witnesses and walks alongside any vulnerability that may arise. It is then up to each student to decide which emotions to engage in, and how this journey should unfold.

#### **Quality Four: Mindful Intention Support Navigation of the Edge of Counselling**

Mentoring the TI process can be like running full speed along a tightrope. The meetings move quickly, with typically ten or fifteen minutes per session and anywhere from ten to thirty five students coming in back-to-back. There is a sense of needing to stay focused, to be aware of every step. When emotion laden touchstone stories come up, it becomes useful for the mentor to hold a particular type of space so that the mentee can begin to explore the entwined worlds where memory, emotion and pedagogical opportunity merge. This emotional work necessitates a protected space while, paradoxically, a space of unknown possibilities, a *safe-enough* space. Mindful intention plays a key role here.

As Michele wrote, “the edge of counselling is a liminal space requiring mindful intention, a threshold where new ways of being~doing~knowing can be embraced and enacted, where the courage to be present can lead to deep personal and professional change.” And Maureen shared that as a mentor, “Sometimes the only response that is needed is calm reassurance and a quiet space that welcomes the emotions in.” Meaghan reinforced this from her student perspective:

The edge of counselling needs to be a space of “do no harm” practices where sometimes we just sit with the emotions and questions and sometimes we need to discuss or delve into the spaces. If either side forces the emotional work, the safety of this edge is compromised. It is a reciprocal act in which both parties need to maintain their responsibility to one another. A safe-enough space is created through the shared respect and openness that is created.

Mentoring at the edge of counselling requires mindfulness, an aware, undefended, and nonjudgmental presence to what is. It also requires the intent to create a safe-enough space and time for personal and professional exploration, compassionate listening, and doing no harm.

Instructors are continuously adapting to the needs of their students and each situation requires unique attention. As Eckhart Tolle (1999) articulated:

Intense presence is needed when certain situations trigger a reaction with a strong emotional charge, such as when your self-image is threatened, a challenge comes into your life that triggers fear, things ‘go wrong,’ or an emotional complex from the past is brought up. (p. 46)

This type of presence is difficult to sustain and is at the heart of the mentoring relationship that fosters the edge of counselling. Sometimes instructors are able to engage their students more effectively than others. Instructors always strive to do the best for their students, but as in all

teaching, there are missed opportunities. We want to gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the instructors whose stories have helped us explain the qualities of the edge of counselling. Despite these two vignettes, their skills with the TI process are exceptional.

### **Quality Five: Emotions Can Act as Beneficial Catalysts towards Transformation**

The three qualities of practicing careful discernment, shared and courageous vulnerability, and mindful intention provide a basis for transformational learning within the edge of counselling. By welcoming students into a space where emotions were not taboo, rich conversations began to unfold. Once acknowledged and held gently, significant stories like the one from Olivia's practicum, or personal situations like Amanda's, could become rich entry points into deeper understanding of a given topic. By entering into the complex conversations that dwell along the edge of counselling, vulnerability can become "the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love" (Brown, 2010). As Meaghan wrote:

To me, the edge of counselling connects the personal with the shared. Here, the mentor is willing to share in the process of the student awakening to the emotions, questions and uncertainties held inside. It is a space where we must be deeply rooted in relational accountability, generous listening, trust, and honesty. Both the student and mentor need to approach the edge together for it to be a safe space and a place of 'do no harm.' In this space we are able to share our emotions, worldviews and truest selves with one another. It becomes a place where the real questions can be asked: the ones we are afraid or ashamed to ask, and the questions we may not know are there. This is not always a place of comfort for us, but it is a place where transformation can happen. There are many emotions that may arise in this space: shame, fear, pain, anger. Transformation can occur

when we remain in touch with the emotions and questions that arise, while also staying relationally accountable to each other.

According to Nick, the edge of counselling:

Is a place that has some risks associated with entering into it, but through the process of mapping and exploring this territory in each other and in our students, we have the potential to help engage more fully in the presence of being alive. This aliveness (or what Nhat-Hanh (2008) calls an awakened-state) is critical in societies of compassionate humans.

In Olivia's case, the mother's comment may have initially seemed tangential to questions of clutter and aesthetics. Yet, it can also be seen as a compelling space for a deeper inquiry to take place. What *was* good about that kid? What are the aesthetics of parent dynamics? What kinds of clutter might have been present in that short conversation? We can see the edge of counselling emerging as an opportunity for Instructor 1 to carefully walk alongside Olivia, as she fosters a more mindful understanding of her role as teacher. Conversely, Instructor 2 might have defined the professional nature of the course more fully, thus encouraging Amanda to see how her personal experience might inform her teaching.

To highlight the catalytic possibility of emotion, here is a third vignette where Instructor 3 blends the practice of discernment, shared vulnerability, and mindful intention to support Ashley as she explored her emotions around a distressing practicum experience.

**Ashley and instructor 3: Anger collage.**

Ashley entered the TI process by asking questions around Aboriginal Education, "What does it entail? How, as a student teacher, do we know when/to what extent we can incorporate [it

in our classrooms]? What is immersion vs. integration? What are the benefits?” These questions held a particular resonance for Ashley as a woman of Métis heritage, and initially she had a keen plan laid out as to how she would pursue her topic. Ashley’s inquiry began to take unexpected paths however, when she broke down and revealed that she had withdrawn from her practicum before she had completed it, so as not to be failed. She cited “being too creative” as a debilitating source of conflict between her teaching style and that of her supervisor and mentor teacher.

As Ashley talked, Instructor 3 listened and encouraged her to express the complexities of her situation. When Ashley exclaimed that she was “still too angry” to share her story with her peers, Instructor 3 suggested that her anger might be an entry point into a deeper understanding of her experience, and gave Ashley a number of options to explore her feelings further. Ashley enjoyed creating collages and chose to engage that medium to depict the anger she felt (see Figure 2 below). Later, as the images were discussed in a mentor session, Ashley came to realize that she felt many other emotions along with the anger and a powerful touchstone story surfaced.

At one point in her practicum, Ashley had wanted to incorporate a sensory activity where her students would get to know a tree while blindfolded, and later find that same tree with full sight. To her dismay, Ashley’s mentor teacher condemned the exercise, calling it a “tree hugging” activity. As she recalled her feelings, Ashley’s eyes welled with tears:

I just felt like I was being shut down and she didn’t really respect who I was. ...For me [the activity] is who I am. It’s like, you’re calling my people...I don’t know...it was kind of hard for me. ...So it made me lose my confidence... I ended up teaching in the sort of methods you were talking about, like up in front of the classroom, and note taking. And that’s not who I am. But it was like I didn’t know what else to do... I was in a bad spot

after my practicum... I felt like who I *was*, was the problem. ... Like they were against me and not for me.



Figure 2: Ashley's anger collage

After this heartfelt expression, Instructor 3 and Ashley collaboratively devised a plan for what might be useful and not too vulnerable to share with her peers. Ashley decided to recreate the tree activity during the sharing time, and then asked her peers to help her articulating the importance of such an activity to any future naysayers in a professional manner. In a moment of courage Ashley surprised herself by sharing the taboo topic of her incomplete practicum with her

peers. Her vulnerability and honesty triggered a powerful conversation, as others related to her experience in mindful and empathetic ways.

Instructor 3 was able to support Ashley as her emotions became entry points into her topic, without getting stuck in them. The value of these qualities became clear in the rich conversation Ashley led with her peers and future colleagues. Attending carefully to emotional reactions, touchstone memories and patterned ways of being can become possible entry points into deeper understanding of both the students we teach, and who we are be~coming as teachers. Through holding these often-emotional topics gently and mindfully, teaching practice and teacher identity can be opened to transformation.

### **The Edge of Counselling from a Counsellor's Perspective**

The TI process can be fraught with unexpected, awkward and possibly volatile emotions requiring a mindful and generous approach. As our analysis progressed, we felt unsure as to how instructors should navigate this terrain. While data analysis and written explorations brought us fuller understanding, the input and expertise of Indrus, our transpersonal psychologist team member, has been invaluable. Because her insight has been so useful we include here, her full response to the prompt. To me the edge of counselling...

...Helps me imagine an educational environment where teachers and psychologists work together to create a learning spirit environment where all learners thrive. Engaging with the TI group in our day seminars has been exciting and informative. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my perspective on this timely topic.

As a therapist, it is heartening to witness the TI group's willingness to explore where the edges of teaching and counselling meet and intertwine. Their enthusiasm to

learn how to better traverse the emotional minefields that at times may emerge from students in their classes is a testament to their understanding that the emotional and psychological state of a student cannot be hung on a coat hook outside the classroom door and put back on after leaving the class. I understand for some this may seem like a radical opinion but I believe counselling and teaching are, in fact, kissing cousins. They are innately interrelated.

All teachers engage in counselling, consciously or unconsciously, and the archetype of a counsellor is closely aligned to that of the teacher. Any therapist who has been in private practice will attest to the undeniable influence teachers have on the psyche of the developing self, often second only to the influence of the parent(s). Counselling is inherent within the teacher-student relationship, and it is vital to better prepare future teachers for this reality. I would go as far as to suggest that the primary role of the teacher is not to convey information, facts or figures or to teach math or science, but to support the child to know who they are, and essentially, to reflect back to the child their unique essence. If we view teaching from this perspective we would then also have to acknowledge and prepare teachers for their role as something akin to spiritual midwives, which I believe already exist with either affirmative or injurious effects.

I am aware my ideas are not in alignment with what is mandated or encouraged of teachers. I do not believe schooling and teaching, as they are presently being actualized, are attending to the foremost need of the child such that he or she know they are of supreme value to their community, and their society. If we aspire to inspire this in children, the first undertaking of education is to support children to gain the self awareness essential to reach their full potential. And my concept of living our potential is

not producing generations that are “educated” to produce more so a select few can over prosper and then call this system progress. Realizing potential is living with a sense of meaning and connectedness with those around us and with the earth herself, thus encouraging a path to right livelihood.

Now, when we must consider what kind of knowledge is most required in this age of mass information, it seems like an appropriate time for us all to embark on a discussion that centers around the inquiry... can a child learn anything of value if they do not know the value of their own personhood?

So really this is a plea to acknowledge what I believe is already underway: a vital paradigm shift in teaching and psychology like the fact that the Earth’s separate oceans make up one larger ocean. Both fields could develop into significant leaders in transforming what is required to “educate” in today’s beautiful, yet troubled world.

### **The Edge of Counselling in Teacher Education and Beyond**

In many ways, the edge of counselling as discussed here, describes the most relevant findings to date in the larger TI research project. All teachers are implicated as being counsellors. Our work with Indrus has helped us to see that the edge of counselling is no longer a place to avoid, but a place to honour and engage in consciously. There is a need for courage, an opening to possibilities. And as Nick wrote, “we must strive to chart the territory of the edge of counselling within education systems to support moving beyond the superficial or debilitating barriers to a place of human-ness and awakening.”

Exploring the edge of counselling is simultaneously rich and frightening, unsettling and exciting. Within these tensions are important nuggets that illuminate the way forward into a new

educational paradigm. Educators can choose to become familiar with the terrain of counselling and see it as an opportunity for learning and growth. Often, emotions need to percolate or simmer on the back burner; dealing with them later can be an important and necessary choice. But sweeping them under the rug, leaving them at the door or putting them into a vault that rarely gets opened can be harmful as emotions fester and burst from unnecessary pressure or neglect. With new teacher burnout rates in North America increasing from previous generations (Williams, 2012), attending to the edge of counselling may support long-term enthusiasm and deeper engagement in the profession.

We have found that the emotional landscape of learning and teaching is one that is often inadequately understood, acknowledged, and discussed within a professional teaching practice. Three entities emerged as integral to negotiating the edge of counselling: practicing careful discernment supports the negotiation of emotional terrain; shared and courageous vulnerability facilitates emotional engagement; mindful intention supports navigation of the edge of counselling. When these qualities are integrated, emotions can act as beneficial catalysts towards transformation.

Hence, these identified qualities act as a prescriptive set of values that we seek to practice in learning~teaching environments. By valuing emotions, and finding the methods to artfully engage our students in acknowledging their emotions, we have seen extra-ordinary transformations occur. We believe that learner~teachers that are given the permission to talk about emotions and are supported by skillful instructors will likely become teachers that continue to prioritize the emotional landscapes inherent in their own classrooms.

We have begun to describe some of the physical and temporal characteristics of the edge of counselling. In order to achieve the deeper connections and authentic human-ness that many

learners seek, educators must make time to create and hold safe-enough space for appropriate emotional engagement. In the TI course, our increasing awareness of the edge of counselling helps instructors to listen more carefully to the stories built into each pre-service teacher's experience. Our hope is that we are modeling a way that can be brought forward and shared with the many learners they will connect with in years to come.

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