Small Social Actions for Big Social Change Project
Social Work 697.03
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Process

This assignment has helped me learn to take an active role in initiating social justice conversations and events. Sometimes one or two or even three attempts to initiate such conversations simply do not work.

At different times during the semester, I tried to use the forum created on D2L to start some conversations with my classmates, on various topics such as how to deal with challenging realities of Trump's administration in the US, triad relationships, and aboriginal psychotherapy. I took these same subjects of conversation to Facebook, and I asked people to consider meeting in person to have some of these conversations in person.

Eventually, I realized (thank you for that gentle invitation, Dr. Shaw) that these attempts at inviting conversation and initiating the raising of awareness simply were not working. *This did not mean that I was now off the hook*. I am embarrassed to admit that I did actually say to myself, "well, if no one wants to talk, what can I do?" If all social justice activists took on that stance, NOTHING WOULD HAPPEN.

However, because I honour and forgive myself, I did not spend too much time shaming myself… Instead, I got my butt in gear.

I took up the invitation to become more active, and I joined with two of my classmates to organize an event in the Faculty of Social work. The idea of screening the Phil Borges' (2016) *Crazywise* documentary came from Facebook. One of my colleagues, Moira, wondered if we could show the film in the faculty. I began looking for ways to make it happen. Then we invited Jennie, who recently presented on Mad Studies in our class, to join our little group as our resident "expert" on alternative perspectives on mental illness. We were all very excited about creating an opportunity to reflect on how our Western society understands and responds to people's experiences with what we call "mental health". Between the three of us, we arranged all the necessary permissions to screen the film, decide on a time and date, arrange the room, create posters, and begin advertising and promoting the event on social media.

During the preparation process, we also had lots of conversations about the subject matter of the film, having watched the documentary as part of preparing. Personally, I discovered connections between the subject matter of the film and some of the theorists I have been studying in postmodern approaches to therapy (specifically the work of Finland's Jaakko Seikkula and the Open Dialogue approach). This lead to a lot of new energy and excitement! And I appreciated this so much - these recent weeks and months had begun to feel very heavy with assignments and pressures to figure out what I'm going to do after I graduate (if I

graduate!). Also, given the terrifying changes currently being undertaken by a powerful government in North America, I needed this boost of energy. The learning for me here was very important: no matter how seemingly small the social action I undertake, the impact on my inner landscape, my perspective, my level of energy is IMMENSE. I had forgotten that, and it was so good to remember!

My colleagues and I were very excited by the subject matter and the opportunity to have the conversation in our faculty with fellow students. As I advertised the screening on Facebook, other people I know came forward and initiated conversations with me about their experiences as psychiatric survivors! It was so exciting when people from outside of the faculty, in particular people who identify as psychiatric survivors, became interested in participating in attending the screening!

March 16
Screening Night!

What an awesome evening! We brought food (deer meat chilli and vegetarian chilli made by Jennie, cornbread made by my supportive husband Kevin, and delicious cookies made by Moira). We had a kettle going and hot tea available. Between students, faculty members, and members of the community of psychiatric survivors I connected with this past week, there was 30 of us present!

We introduced ourselves, the project, and the documentary. We invited people to consider having an open mind to the ideas, and to be mindful of emotions and feelings. We welcomed all feelings and anything that might arise. We asked each other to work together to create a safe and a brave space. Everything went off without a hitch. It was really amazing!

Following the screening, we had about 30 minutes to talk a little bit about our experience of the film, thoughts, feelings. Even though the time for this part of the screening was short, people shared some very personal things, and there was a general sense of gratitude for the documentary and the ideas shared in the film.

And, within a few hours of the screening one of the participants started a Crazywise Calgary Facebook Group! I am one of the admins, and I am so excited about the possibilities. I have much more to say, but I am so tired… Tomorrow, Moira, Jennie and I, are having a post-action debrief. More reflections to follow.

March 18th
Post-Screening Debrief and Reflection

Moira, Jennie, and I met for a debrief meeting over leftover chili and cornbread yesterday. In our conversation, we were all very pleased with how successful the evening way, and with the energy that process of creating the event and the event itself generated in our and in the community. We spoke about how surprised we were with our own ability to work past worries

and fears about making things happen, and how the collaborative process of sharing ideas back and forth, and encouraging each other, is ultimately what made it possible. This was lovely learning for us, and for me specifically, to realize just how much I love doing things like this together with other people, how much I thrive in the context of collaborating and communicating ideas, and supporting others in their thinking as well as being supported. It is so life-giving!

We also talked about what our role, as social workers, might be in furthering the conversation that we began by showing the film.

We touched on the following ideas about how to continue the conversation in the community, perhaps after we have completed the degree (this list includes notes Moira took during our chat, as well as some of the ideas I have also had):
- finding ways to invite input and communication with people who identify as psychiatric survivors (Facebook group? Panel discussions? Larger event to screen Crazywise with a panel of speakers from the community?)
- is there a place for an advocacy role that Social Work can play specifically with people who identify as psychiatric survivors? What about creating advocacy in Calgary based on the Mad in America model?
- how can the profession play a role as allies?
- critiquing DSM and how people experience Mental Health system in Alberta, i.e. protesting electric shock therapy (which continues to be administered in all Calgary hospitals)
- asking the critical questions when we support people with mental health issues
- creating spaces for conversation - not knowing ripple out effect i.e. FB page created
- collaboration between faculty of SW and "psych survivors" - conversations? workshops? “Spiritual Emergence Group”?
- how do we continue these conversations - connect people?
- do we do this as social justice workers, clinical workers, or survivors ourselves?
- how does this topic get more voice in the faculty/curriculum? Can we advocate for that?
- importance of knowing both system/DSM well to work in/with it and critique it
- excitement and energy in collaboration process - propels project
- trusting our guts - learning to take risks - different strengths in group (learning from each other)
- conversation about “birthing” or “threshold” transitions - mentorship/elders, claiming and living our age
- how to discuss stigma as another layer to diagnosis? Diagnosis is helpful BUT it’s labeling and very hard to get rid of the sticky label!
- why is stigma so big? How can we initiate conversations about this?

This social justice project was offered some powerful learning about getting a move on organizing, the joy of pursuing curiosity, the beauty of collaboration, and how all that leads to new perspectives, and new energy. For me, it was also a re-learning about my capacity to be in leadership. It helped boost my confidence and I made some friends! Very enlivening!