

A Co-Creative Transformation Process: The Art of Adults Learning Together in CPE Group

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By looking through the eyes of co-creation – seeing that we are co-creating this universe, co-creating our relationships, and co-creating our experiences –we find the unseen patterns that exist inside of us. And with this clear-eyed wisdom, we begin to cut the line, and drop the anchor into our truest selves.

–Debbie Ford¹

Learning in CPE is a co-creative process requiring the use of ourselves, our stories, and our understandings of the art and science of spiritual care. When engaged co-creatively, CPE offers myriad opportunities for group members to form in ways that support empathic engagement. As a former music educator, I have experienced ineffable ways that the arts and co-creative processes affect the human spirit. For a decade, teaching music, I worked with melody, harmony, texture, form, style, and dynamics. I invited students to play their songs with me. I shared and listened while learners, similarly, listened and shared. I noticed how—in the co-creative process—the science of sound as well as the artform evoked emotions, increased self-awareness, opened my students and me to new ideas, and helped us attune one to one another.²

Similarly, in supervisory relationships, I notice how co-creative processes, like those I facilitated in music class, reveal patterns, help us connect as a group, and provide an understanding about being part of a greater collaborative multidisciplinary team. Co-creative learning is about making, doing, and noticing (acting and reflecting) as we aim for shared results *together*. When we collaborate in generative co-creative CPE process groups, we have opportunities to learn ACPE outcomes together by enriching and broadening personal perspectives; noticing similarities and differences; attending to stories set in history and culture; building group process; and challenging each other to learn and grow.

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Today more than ever, in the context of systematic oppressions and the global pandemic, I find myself leaning toward co-creative modalities. These modalities respectfully and evocatively invite learners into an artful process amidst the stresses of working in the context of loss, pain, and grief. The way I use co-creation in CPE is rooted in transformational learning theory, which honors adult students as co-learners in an andragogical methodology.³ Working in group co-creatively opens possibilities for a more subjective, intuitive, affective, imaginal, and relational pedagogy.

WHAT DOES CO-CREATION LOOK LIKE IN PROCESS GROUP?

A true conversation is co-creation.

—Sarah Rozenthuler⁴

Co-creative spaces are relational spaces. They exist when the head and heart meet to consider possibilities. They exist when adult learners meet to engage the clinical rhombus.⁵ Co-creativity is like a playground for the clinical method, a place that balances reason and emotion, theology and spirit, cognition and affect, the linear and the spiralic. Working co-creatively in the learning environment brings about fundamental changes within adult learners, often involving disorienting dilemmas.⁶ These dilemmas call for extra-rational and co-creative tools. That is why music, story, metaphor, and image work well in a co-creative CPE process. Jungian theory—replete with the use of symbol, archetype, and imagery (also components of the co-creative process)—similarly enriches the co-creative learning environment. This way of working together opens ways of meaning making and provides opportunities to understand, more deeply, what it means to be spiritual care practitioners.⁷

Generally, I invite creativity and co-creativity into my practice by staying open, loose, curious; considering the ‘what ifs’; being serious as well as silly, ponderous and playful; noticing synchronicities; honoring intuition; and reframing, or thinking outside of the box.⁸ As I engage in these ways and invite adult learners to do the same, a co-creative space emerges. Here, inner knowings, reason and logic, theory, life experience, memories, possibilities, random abstract connections, sensory notions, and images may collaborate and, even, play. When a group is co-creative, we ask questions like: Have you looked at it this way? How do you feel? How do you engage when you are uncertain, challenged, afraid? Where is the sacred in this story? Co-creativity invites us to slow down and engage in courageous and curious ways. It helps to create an environment that receives, retains, and reframes our impressions and beliefs as well as our ways of being in the world. Co-creation can be a simple, accessible, swift, and often satisfying way to get at ontological and existential questions and move closer to understanding.⁹

SEVEN WAYS TO INCORPORATE CO-CREATIVE PROCESSES IN THE ADULT LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The world we live in is a co-creation, a manifestation of individual consciousness woven into a collective dream. How we are with each other as individuals, as groups, as nations and tribes is what shapes that dream.

—Oriah Dreamer¹⁰

There are innumerable ways in which to engage co-creation in group process. These invitations facilitate a brave space¹¹ where learning and transformation may emerge in each of us. The beauty of these invitations is that they often catalyze surprising learning experiences in which both the adult learner and I create new ideologies or understandings to apply in our practice. During the first week of a new group, I usually invite adult learners to watch an inspirational video such as Jim Carrey's *I Need Color*, which *inspires* a co-creative conversation about what each of us needs and what each of us brings, as gift, in learning together in group. Using this video acknowledges co-creation in community from the start.

Engaging co-creatively is like working with any trusted teacher. It provides opportunities to recognize the uniquenesses of our learning needs and gifts. It is not right nor wrong. It goes beyond customary thinking by taking the long road. It helps us see ourselves honestly, saying, "I see I do that," and decide, "So, I'll continue" . . . or, "Therefore, I'll change my behavior." Either way, motivation to change is most likely to succeed when it comes from within.¹² Following are seven examples of other invitations I use to facilitate a co-creative environment.

OPENING IMPROVISATION EXERCISES

Years ago, I was the primary chaplain on a behavioral health unit at a community hospital in a suburb of Chicago. During one unit of CPE, when I was a certified educator candidate, I worked on the unit with a student who was trained in the art of improvisation and who had participated in an internship at Second City, a small comedy cabaret in Chicago. During our work together, she taught me numerous improvisation exercises that we used on the unit. Noticing the impact of these exercises in opening opportunities for group formation as well as individual reflection, I adapted many of them for CPE group.

One improvisation exercise that I use every year in CPE, and often several times within the year, is titled Counting One to Twenty. The exercise consists of having group members, including the educator, sit or stand in a circle. The educator begins the exercise by saying, "One." Using eye contact and intuition, the group counts aloud to twenty in numeric order, one voice at a time, in any random order of voices. If any group member overlaps another in saying a number, the group must begin again from the beginning.

This improvisation exercise creates opportunities for students to laugh, make mistakes, pay attention, and feel joy, elation, disappointment, and frustration. After the exercise, the group processes the experience, each member explaining their methodology for engaging the improvisation exercise. As we listen, we inevitably notice the many and unique approaches group members employed. During the conversation, we make organic connections to group relationships, the provision of spiritual care, and the work of formation.

ONE-WORD-AT-A-TIME STORY

Another co-creational improvisational exercise is the One-Word-at-a-Time Story. In this simple yet meaningful improvisation exercise, the group sits or stands in a circle with the task of telling a story one word at a time. The story may be about anything and will emerge as adult learners add one word at a time to the narrative. I usually begin by saying, 'Once . . .' After a few minutes, as the story has had the opportunity to take shape one word at a time, with group members adding a word at a time going clockwise around the circle, I end the tale by saying, "The End," at which time we debrief the experience. Questions that typically emerge are the following: What did it feel like when the story took a direction other than the one you had anticipated? How did it feel following the person to your right? What happened that you appreciated? What happened that you did not appreciate? How did you feel at different times during the co-creative process? What did this exercise teach you about yourself, your belief system, and your provision of spiritual care?

Students report that they learn about themselves and their spiritual care during and after this exercise. Often our conscious views, thoughts, feelings, and actions shift. Sometimes our understanding of "relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender emerge . . . and our senses of possibilities for social justice, peace, and personal joy become part of our conversation."¹³ In this co-creative learning environment, learners become teachers, I become a student, and vice versa. In this space, as we become more integrated, our actions begin to change our learning community and beyond. Instead of power-over, we move toward co-creation.

ICON TABLEAU EXERCISE

Another way I invite groups into the caring, respectful space of co-creation is through Images of Faith and Belief, a group-forming exercise I learned from a seminary professor. I ask each adult learner to bring in an item representing their faith or spirituality. We sit at a round table taking turns sharing our items and describing their import. Then, we bring our items to the chapel or another shared space that has a large table. In silence, the group waits as I use a singing bowl to indicate four movements. With the first ring, we place our items on the altar or table, one at a time. With the second, we move any item we'd like to create a tableau. Once the group is satisfied with what we have created, as

evidenced by sitting in stillness, I ring the bowl a third time. At that point, we gaze at the tableau to reflect, internally, on the experience. A last ring of the singing bowl invites us to discuss the experience.

In a recent residency group, as we reflected on the co-creative experience, two residents noted how “nervous” they were about touching items belonging to their peers. One brought up the reverential “sense of care” felt in the room as we created the tableau. Another noted how much he appreciated it when one of his peers leaned his icon against hers in a “place where [he] could see it.” I asked guided questions to help us make connections with how this co-creative experience may be like our work with each other and our work in the hospital clinic. With my careful facilitation, we covenanted to treat our differences with compassion, care, and respect. This exercise affords opportunities for co-creative conversations that exemplify the fluidity between the literal and the symbolic, tapping into Jungian archetypal and symbolic theory.

IMAGES OF GRIEF

Later during the unit, often after a bereavement didactic, I invite students into a co-creative experience inspired by an image I saw in an art museum during a personal time of bereavement. First, I invite students to remember a time in their life when they experienced a loss. Next, I provide each student with their own sheet of posterboard along with red and black markers. The students take thirty minutes to create an image representing their bereavement. The instructions are as follows:

Please take time to consider your loss, imagine the shape and size of it. Consider what was going on in your life, particularly during the initial season of your bereavement. Take a moment to imagine the size, shape, and movement of your grief. The only specific direction you must adhere to is to use the red marker to represent your grief. Please begin the shape of your grief on the left side of your poster and end it leaving the right side of your poster. The width, height, path, and direction of your grief may be represented in any way you imagine (spirals, lines, zigzags, etc.). When you have finished drawing your grief with the red marker, use the black marker to add symbols representing other elements in your life at the time (i.e., work responsibilities, family life, extra-curricular activities, hobbies, etc.).

When the students have finished the drawing portion of this exercise, I invite one person at a time to tape their poster to the wall and share any comments about their grief and this process of creating art about it. The next person places the red line representing their grief so it connects with the previous group member’s line, and the process continues. At the end of this co-creative process, we sit gazing at the wall and noticing the ways our griefs are connected and the ways they are similar and different. We use this project and the reflection on it to learn about ourselves and to expand our empathy, attunement, and care as spiritual care practitioners.

STORY THEOLOGY

At the beginning of each of the three units in a one-year residency, we engage in an hour-long archetypal and imaginal seminar created by ACPE Educator Beth Burbank. Each student writes a one-page story from their life (preferably from before they were five years old). We spend about an hour focusing on each story, one at a time. First, we listen to the story. Then, I ask about feelings experienced in themselves and within the story. Then, I invite the sharing of any stories in our own lives that this story nudges into memory. Next, I broaden the conversation by making connections with archetypal stories (from film, literature, or other sacred texts). As we close our conversation, we make theological connections, finding meaning in the story and asking where God, the divine, the holy or sacred, or the Ground of Being is in this story; and, ultimately, we brainstorm ways this experience will impact our provision of spiritual care.

I use this exercise with the hope that it will help students continue to build relationships via shared stories, moving from pseudo-community toward true community. Additionally, I have found that storytelling can be a gentle entry into theological discourse that fosters connections between orthodoxy and orthopraxy while keeping the group in the open, nonreactive space that the imaginal espouses. Finally, by engaging in this process, learners may choose to use insights and empathy gained along the way as resources for their development as spiritual care practitioners.¹⁴

During a recent unit, the students and I gleaned numerous learnings from story theology seminars. A significant one was found in resident Seo-jun's beloved childhood story of fishing in South Korea as a boy at the time of the cold war between North and South Korea. The story took place after a "great typhoon." It was about teamwork, courage, and community as a group of young boys, including Seo-jun, caught fish beneath a flooded tree and then fed them to their neighborhood in a stew with rice. Seo-jun's story led our group into an engagement with cultural humility and sensitive inquiry that helped us get to know Seo-jun better and helped us notice differences and similarities within our group. The story delighted the group; members felt tender melancholy for Seo-jun. I experienced the story as a metaphor for ministry amidst challenges. He and his friends were trying to feed those in the community with meager and personal resources, similar to ministerial struggles during the pandemic.

Seo-jun's sharing and the group's inquiry set the tone for honesty and vulnerability in future story theology seminars and in other presentations. I use this exercise because, as seen in this example, students self-disclose using metaphor. They allow others in the group to see them and often end up seeing themselves more clearly. This self-revelation leads to transformative learning, which directly impacts pastoral function. As groups and I co-create, I honor myself and the members of the group as experts in our own ways. This includes trusting that each of us holds an inner wisdom that is infinitely knowable and infinitely unknowable. In relationship, we honor the images and metaphors that come, allowing them to be translated based on individual

lived experiences, culture, and family of origin. While we attend and relate to others—often others who are different from ourselves—we see recognizable parts of ourselves and our communities and find connections and disconnections that may be surprising.

LIVE VERBATIM

An exercise I call Live Verbatim is yet another invitation for co-creative adult learning. It was developed by Educator Lori Kaufmann of Advocate Aurora Healthcare. Instead of utilizing our typical verbatim template for written-narrative theological reflection, I invite adult learners to bring a brief scenario written on a 3 x 5 card to group. The scenario must contain a presenting spiritual distress, a brief note from the medical chart (such as the presenting problem), and a description of the chaplain's interventions.

Two group members read the scenario and act it out live in group. At numerous times during the co-creative process, I announce, "Freeze." At that time, we reflect on the spiritual care encounter, considering how spiritual assessment models may be used to assess what is happening in the interaction and the feelings of the people in the encounter and providing an opportunity for group members to offer the presenter feedback, critique, and ideas for other possible spiritual care interventions. Sometimes—especially in larger groups—when I ask the participants to freeze, I invite them to tap another group member as an invitation for them to take their place in the scenario. This adds another layer of improvisational co-creative possibilities for experience, discussion, and insight.

SOUL COLLAGE

During summer intensives, extended units, or residencies, adult learners and I work to answer the question, Who am I and why do I do this work? As part of the final evaluation process, I often offer a co-creative invitation to answer this question using extra-rational means such as Soul College, a commonly used tool in CPE. Described briefly, it is a process in which adult learners and I use clippings from magazines to create a collage that we glue onto a 5 x 8 mat board. The clippings are images that catch our attention. The collage is then used in an interactive, co-creative group discussion where we complete sentences like I am one who . . . , My gift to you is . . . , The way you'll remember me is . . . , When I am out of balance you . . .

CHALLENGES AND SOME CONCLUSIONS

The world is what the individual makes it. A world of individuals is the intersubjective, collective mind field of all those individuals. We can see things afresh, enter relationships renewed and with new purpose of sharing.

We can become poets and seers of reality. We can become great adepts, true individuals, agents of compassions. To live in a world is to be constantly creating that world. —Robert A. F. Thurman¹⁵

Co-creation happens when learners engage in creative exercises like those above. We are not all immediately adept at co-creative work, though, and it is clearly not the only work of CPE. Early on in my supervision, I felt frustrated if there wasn't much enthusiasm or buy-in from my students when it came to the co-creative threads in my curriculum. Many times students would say, "I'm not artistic; I cannot draw, or write, or improvise." I've learned to carefully listen and, with compassion, I respect the opposition. I also acknowledge that, much like spiritual care, it may be scary or feel vulnerable to take risks in sharing co-creatively. I make sure to share my own feelings of vulnerability. I intentionally honor fears, anxieties, and shame that may emerge. Along with this, I also gently encourage, and challenge, students to explore and try out these new experiences. Further, I emphasize that these co-creative experiences are more about process than product. I set very low expectations about products, letting students know that the goal of co-creation is not to make something to display or showcase in an art gallery or onstage. I let them know that our purpose is to notice together what emerges in the process of co-creating.

Sometimes, despite my gentle invitations and attempts to lower expectations about production, students remain resistant. Further, sometimes exercises do not catalyze opportunities for the exploration of inner terrain, insight, meaning-making, attunement, or enlarged empathy that I desire. At times like these, I remember that the art of the co-creative process means responding in the moment improvisationally and easing up if a methodology isn't serving the group's learning.

Because I know I value creativity and tend toward creative approaches, I monitor my supervisory preferences and make sure to offer students a balanced curriculum. This, in and of itself, is an important aspect of co-creation—acknowledgment of the myriad ways students learn.

As I remain flexible with my curriculum, I continue to be convinced that engaging in co-creativity is one of the most valuable ways to increase students' self-awareness and their capacity to engage in reflective spiritual care. I have found, through the years, that the more practice students have in sharing co-creatively—trying out different exercises—the more efficacious this kind of work becomes. In her book *Big Magic: Creative Living beyond Fear*, Elizabeth Gilbert tells the story of a poet describing the difficult work of writing as similar to constantly lowering a bucket halfway down a well and coming up with empty air. Sometimes students and I have experiences like this when we try to co-create in the formational work of CPE. If we persist in imaginably reflecting, though, and continue to *notice together*, the poet says that we will one day find that the chain of the bucket has finally, and unexpectedly, become tight. We'll realize that we have dipped into waters that will entice us back time and again because we have broken the skin on the pool of ourselves.¹⁶

NOTES

- ¹ Debbie Ford, *The Secret of the Shadow: The Power of Owning Your Whole Story* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 37.
- ² Donald A. Hodges, *Music in the Human Experience: An Introduction to Music Psychology* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 182.
- ³ Edward W. Taylor and Patricia Cranton, *The Handbook of Transformative Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 68.
- ⁴ Sarah Rozenhuler, *Powered by Purpose: Energise Your People to Do Great Work* (FT Publishing, 2014), 33.
- ⁵ Rudolf Exstein and Robert S. Wallerstein, *The Teaching and Learning of Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 63. The clinical rhombus is a conceptual model depicting the complex psychosocial nature of the learning environment that parallels the spiritual care encounter.
- ⁶ A *disorienting dilemma* happens when an experience illuminates and challenges invisible and unquestioned assumptions that determine how one knows oneself and the world. The process of transformation is greatly enhanced when one is encouraged to engage the dilemma in a way that inspires new ways of perceiving it.
- ⁷ Robert D. Boyd and Gordon Myers, "Transformative Education," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 7 (1988): 125.
- ⁸ Adapted from the work of inspirational artist SARK.
- ⁹ Marlene Halpin. *Imagine That! Using Phantasy in Spiritual Direction* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1982), 55.
- ¹⁰ Oriah Mountain Dreamer, *What We Ache For: Creativity and the Unfolding of Your Soul* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005), 101.
- ¹¹ Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, *The Art of Effective Facilitation* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2015), 135. Arao and Clemens, in their group work around diversity and social justice conversations, reframe the idea of respectful and sensitive space (or comfortable learning environments) with their idea of creating a "brave space" for learning. This, it seems to me, invites a more spacious learning environment where candor and challenge are welcome.
- ¹² Halpin, *Imagine That!*, 28.
- ¹³ Edmund O'Sullivan, "Bringing A Perspective of Transformative Learning to Globalized Consumption," *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 27, no. 4 (2003): 326.
- ¹⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, *Jung on Active Imagination*, ed. Joan Chodorow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 167.
- ¹⁵ Robert A. F. Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995), 4, 164.
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Big Magic: Creative Living beyond Fear* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), 148.