

Deconstruction in the round

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This paper outlines a formal assignment that includes narratively-informed interview and deconstruction exercises and which introduces students to the externalising conversations map and outsider-witness conversations / definitional ceremony map. These exercises involve a range of pedagogic approaches, including class teaching, personal research and preparation, interviews, deconstructive conversations, and written reflections about what was learnt.

Keywords: narrative practice, narrative therapy, training, training exercises, deconstruction, therapeutic orientation, externalising, discourses, outsider-witness practices, definitional ceremony

We are not interested in solely ‘depositing knowledge in students’ heads’, but instead in creating a context that supports students as they find their way into this work, bringing with them their local knowledges, experiences, and histories of trying to be helpful to other human beings. We think about students as co-researchers embarking on a process of discovery.

The intention of the following exercise is to give students and trainees the opportunity to more fully explore the interviewing process: students craft questions and have the opportunity to co-research the effects of questions; pay attention to what opens space and what closes down space in therapy conversation; and listen for discourses that contribute to keeping certain problems alive. One student reflected on her experience of this exercise:

Often in class I would hear Lynne say, ‘you never know what question you have asked until you hear the answer’, but it wasn’t until this exercise that the idea hit me to the core. When crafting my questions in preparation for interviewing my classmate, I made every effort to review my readings, review my notes, and to reflect, all in the hopes of asking the ‘right’ questions, questions that I hoped would elicit a certain answer, provoke a certain thought, or in some way might empower the interviewee. I took close to two hours perfecting each question, trying to guess how the interviewee might react and where the interviewee might lead me. I believed I had stumbled across every possibility, but of course I was wrong. I had closed myself off to the possibilities. Thinking that I had explored every stone that I had turned had only hindered me instead of helping me. What happened next was something I had yet to experience. Whatever it is I had found – I call it ‘openness’ – flowed and felt right, and that is what I will take with me as I continue to trek upon this new-found path. ‘Openness to possibility’ is a lesson I learned and will keep with me throughout my therapeutic career.

DECONSTRUCTION IN THE ROUND ASSIGNMENT:

Step 1: Form groups of three students. Schedule a one-hour meeting. Each member will identify and

tell a brief story (five minutes) about a current or a retired problem. Students will work together to name the problem using externalising language. In preparation for the next meeting, you will decide who will be positioned as interviewer for each interviewee.

Step 2: On your own in preparation for your role as interviewer, craft six deconstructive questions for the interviewee you will interview at your next meeting:

- Map the effects of the problem (two questions).
- Expose discourses that support the problem (two questions).
- Research a hidden kernel of an alternative story. Optimally, these questions will emerge from openings that came forward in the initial telling of the story of the problem (two questions).

Step 3: Plan a meeting, either outside class or in class time (you will probably need to set aside 2 hours).

Come to the meeting prepared to occupy all three of the following positions. You will have one interviewer, one interviewee, and one reflector. You will rotate after each round.

Part 1 (5 minutes): The interviewer will pose the six questions they crafted for the designated interviewee. The interviewee will listen without responding to the questions. The interviewee will take notes regarding the effects of the questions. The reflector will also take notes about the effects of the questions, paying close attention to non-verbal cues from the interviewee.

Part 2 (5 minutes): The reflector will briefly interview the interviewee regarding their experience of each question posed by the interviewer. The reflector will use the following guidelines to ask the interviewee further questions. The interviewer will sit back and listen to the dialogue.

The reflector will consider the following guidelines while listening to the interview.

- What catches my interest or imagination? What impression did I form about what the client most values?

- What metaphors, images, or mental pictures took form for me as the interviewee spoke? What ideas do I have about the possible connection between these images and the persons' values, purposes, and intentions?
- How can I situate my responses in my own experiences and history? Where are my responses located in personal (lived) rather than academic interests?
- How might I express ways that witnessing the interview has moved me? Have I been transported to a place I haven't been and/or have I been moved emotionally?

Part 3 (5 minutes): The interviewee will choose a question that was most generative about which they would like to have further dialogue. The interviewee will say why the question is important to them. The interviewer will then interview the interviewee about this.

Part 4: The interviewee and the reflector will ask the interviewer questions about the interviewer's intentions in asking certain questions.

Students will repeat this process until everyone has occupied each position.

DECONSTRUCTION IN THE ROUND

WRITTEN REFLECTIONS:

The following questions are intended to elicit your understanding of narrative theory and practice.

1. List the deconstructive questions you wrote for the interviewee.
2. Write a paragraph about what you learned about the effects of different kinds of questions. What makes certain questions generative?
3. Write a paragraph identifying the discourses related to the stories being told. Craft three questions you might ask to deconstruct societal or cultural discourses that were shaping the interviewee's problem.
4. Write a paragraph about any unique experiences, moments or initiatives that came forward during the interview process. Write three questions that would help you further enquire about these alternative experiences or stories.
5. Write about your experience of the process in relation to the following questions.
 - What surprised you about your experience? You may want to discuss your experience from the different positions of interviewer, interviewee, and reflector.
 - What was rewarding?
 - What did you learn?
 - What did you find most challenging?