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# Learning Freedom: A Journey in Training

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# Learning Freedom: A Journey in Training

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A Training Course-Linked Capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Intercultural Service, Leadership, & Management at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

Advisor: Ryland White

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Student Name: Nick Brzezinski

Date: April 2, 2019

## **Dedication**

To humility and humor, lest I ever take myself too seriously.

## **Acknowledgments**

Abundant gratitude to my parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, and the world's generous gifts for their assistance in the completion of this project and my continual becoming as a human being.

## Table of Contents

Key Terms.....	5
Abstract.....	6
Introduction .....	7
Part One: Training Background.....	9
Part Two: Foundational Theories.....	14
Expanded Consideration of Theory.....	16
Social Justice Education.....	16
hooks.....	17
Emergent Learning.....	20
Lewin.....	21
On Consciousness.....	22
Part Three: Personal Narrative.....	31
Part Four: Insights and Growth.....	41
Training Experiences Beyond SIT.....	43
Part Five: Building a Practice.....	46
Conclusion.....	49
References.....	51
Appendix A: Insights for Broader Use.....	53

## Key Terms

Please note: the following are my personal definitions of the terms listed. I am offering them here to give the reader relevant context for each term's usage throughout the paper. Questions surrounding philosophical topics such as free will, causality, and fate are beyond the scope of this paper. The author appreciates the reader's understanding, and encourages those interested in discussion on these topics to share conversation with him online or in person.

**Oppression:** the internal or external exercise of power resulting in the transgression of liberation. Associated with experiences of limitation and unjust cruelty.

**Self-oppression:** the internal exercise of power resulting in the transgression of liberation. Self-oppression is used frequently throughout the paper, and is defined here to differentiate between other understandings of oppression.

**Liberation:** the intentional, sustained experience of transgressing oppression, as in a "state of liberation." Associated with experiences of freedom.

**Freedom:** the transgression of oppression resulting in the experience of empowerment, joy, agency, and the ability to enact conscious choice within and upon one's own life.

**Practice:** the art of intentional experience of tension (or restriction, constriction) - often in patterned-repetition and to varying degrees - toward experiencing release (freedom) while building one's capacity for experiencing both in greater balance. Practice helps develop one's ability to choose consciously (consent) and exert control within circumstances of life.

**Social Justice Training:** a participatory, intentional engagement leading to the experience of internal change for all involved, as a result of reflective analysis on the shared experience. Expressed another way, training is the process of combining intentional, catalytic elements with fluid, interpersonal attunement; toward the democratization of power, fostering equitable, inclusive, diverse, co-creative growth.

**Co-creation:** the process of combining catalytic elements contributed by two or more entities in a shared experience, resulting in the creation of something new such as information, knowledge, understanding, or realization.

## Abstract

This Training Course-linked Capstone (CLC) integrates learning related to experiential learning theory, engaged pedagogy, emergent learning, and the nature of consciousness, with relevant experience gained throughout my reflective practice phases at SIT Graduate Institute, toward my development as a trainer. This CLC is intended to serve as an exploratory window into the fundamental grounding for my approach to training, and the journey of my growth in applying theoretical principles in practice. It is rooted in my personal experiences with self-oppression and liberation, which I investigate in order to better understand the relationship between those two concepts, as well as their relevance on a personal level and as a trainer. The theories and published works I reference are mainly drawn from ICHR 5410 Training of Trainers: Ethics and ICHR 5025 Training Design in Experiential Learning (TDEL), which I experienced during the on-campus phase at SIT Graduate Institute. The majority of my insights are derived from reflective self-analysis, which has taken place throughout the past year-and-a-half, during my Reflective Practice phase and beyond, in developing my own professional practice over the past year. The theories and practices discussed in this paper are connected to the work of training as the practice of freedom.

## Introduction

In a field  
I am the absence  
of field.  
This is  
always the case.  
Wherever I am  
I am what is missing.

When I walk  
I part the air  
and always  
the air moves in  
to fill the spaces  
where my body's been.

We all have reasons  
for moving.  
I move  
to keep things whole.

- Mark Strand, Keeping Things Whole

Participation in conscious living requires finding order in chaos and transgressing order which becomes oppressive, toward developing new order and the participation in experiences of sustainable freedom.

The art of training can take on many forms. I consider training to be a participatory, intentional engagement leading to the experience of internal change for all involved, as a result of reflective analysis on the shared experience. Expressed another way, training is the process of combining intentional, catalytic elements with fluid, interpersonal attunement; toward the democratization of power, fostering equitable, co-creative growth. In my practice, training frequently takes place in the form of conversational dialogue – in various settings, including formal workshops and informal, interpersonal exchanges in the classroom of life - with the aforementioned catalysts being poignant questions. This form of training blends conversational

dialogue and interview styles, resulting in an interconnected, relatively-casual space of interpersonal disarmament; allowing for a fluid, shared exploration of knowledge and life experiences toward the generation of new knowledge. In this conversational form of training, decentralization of power is achieved both in format as well as execution.

For example, when engaging in training as conversation, I will explicitly state my openness to answering questions, as well as my interest in mindfully asking them. Frequently, in order to start the conversation, I will offer a question such as, “What is something you have noticed recently?” As the conversation ensues, participants are encouraged to contribute to the answering as well as asking. From my perspective as trainer, my duty is to keep the conversation going in a growth-oriented way, while adjusting the dynamics of the interaction and shared space based on feedback that arises during the conversational engagement, noting participants’ preferred style of participating in the experience. Attention, awareness, and improvisation are essential components of this type of training.

In my view, one does not simply turn-on and turn-off being a trainer. Training is a way of orienting one’s self in the world, inextricably linked to how one approaches daily being, individually and communally. This relates to Lynton and Pareek’s *Training for Development* (1990), discussed in *Training Design in Experiential Learning (TDEL)*, which describes training as “being different in the world.” Training is about more than gaining knowledge, it is about growth and change as a trainer, actively in the process of being different, as well as fostering growth and change for others. Training results in difference in the way one behaves, thinks, and relates to the world, on individual and collective levels. Therefore, a trainer interested in co-creating spaces of liberation must investigate their own practices and patterns of self-oppression

and personal liberation, in order to be effective in the practice of training. In my view, training is a way of being as opposed to a profession.

## Part One: Training Background

I have experienced significant growth as a trainer over the past two-and-a-half years. While at SIT, my experiences in ICHR 5025 Training Design in Experiential Learning (TDEL) and ICHR 5410 Training of Trainers: Ethics & Design (TOT) proved pivotal, as they exposed me to social justice education, engaged pedagogy, emergent and experiential learning – concepts which form the foundation of my current understanding of training. My previous understanding of, and experience with, training was limited. When I thought of training, I envisioned stuffy classrooms with theater-style seating beneath fluorescent lights. I associated training with what I would come to learn is known as the ‘banking’ style of education (Freire, 1970).

My prior experience of training was limited to a one-week onboarding class as a new hire at a car rental company - worlds away from social justice training. I knew other types of training existed but had no idea what they looked like in practice or what theoretical principles applied. My experience as a formal educator mostly took place as a math teacher at a charter school for so-called “at-risk” high school students. The vast majority of students were forced to be there as conditions of being on probation, as a result of various discretions with the law. Behavioral issues were a big challenge of the position, and I tried to adopt a stern-yet-kind approach to engaging with students. While I was able to connect well with students on a personal level, I was not equipped to bridge that connection to learning in the classroom. Now I can see my lack of experiential pedagogical understanding and social justice education played a big part in my inability to thrive or foster much student success in that context.

The charter school experience was also aligned with the ‘banking’ philosophy of education, defined further in the next section. The classroom was arranged in theater-style seating, with all desks and chairs in rows facing the front. I stood at the front of the classroom throughout the entire class, mostly lecturing students about the day’s lesson with no input from their perspectives. This student population was facing myriad challenges beyond the classroom, such as harsh socioeconomic realities, various level of drug addiction, criminal histories, dysfunctional home lives, and beyond. Expecting them to be still and quiet while listening to a twenty-five-year-old – that was secretly dealing with his own substance abuse challenges - droll on about geometry was unrealistic, and in some ways oppressive. I was aware of this, and I hated it, yet, I did not know how to change it. I was good at engaging with students on an individual, human level, but I struggled as a classroom facilitator. I lacked the understanding of how to transgress that stifled learning environment, how to engage students in co-creation, and how to bring their voices into the center of the lessons. So we endured what I imagine was a painful experience for all involved on a daily basis, rather than thriving, growing, and becoming in what should have been an exciting, important learning environment.

I have spent extended periods of time throughout my adult life walking around and talking to people – both as a journalist and as a person that enjoys learning the experiences of fellow human beings. What started as a way to appease my curiosity and get outside of my own head began to take on greater meaning over time. The more I spent time by myself, struggling with various personal patterns and isolation, the more deeply I valued each opportunity to engage with others, to get beyond myself – to ask questions, listen, and express my own thoughts and feelings. Additionally, the more I did this I felt an increasing weariness in those I connected with, a similar isolation, an undeniable hunger to be heard and seen without judgement, to be

engaged and listened to deeply. These conversations began to resemble something sacred. When I arrived at SIT I was exposed to a form of training that offered pedagogical principles for transgressing the failures I had as a classroom teacher and shed light on a practical way to utilize my love of engaged conversation.

The philosophy and ethos of training in an experiential setting as outlined during the two aforementioned classes at SIT was the complete opposite of ‘banking.’ I experienced training as an enlivened, fully-participatory engagement, welcoming diverse perspectives from all participants into the overall learning experience. I learned that I had been practicing shades of training in less-intentional, but still impactful, learning experiences through the engaged interpersonal conversations I had been having in my travels, as well as my work conducting conversational interviews as a journalist. I felt a familiarity with many of the concepts I was learning, but it was also fresh and liberating, as I was being equipped with language and theory to ground, name, and more deeply understand things I had previously experienced, such as co-creation. I was drawn to pursuing the training realm more deeply, and walking the path toward becoming a practitioner myself.

The concept of non-formal learning, and the informal classroom, was completely foreign to me prior to enrolling at SIT. As with many learning experiences at SIT, I had long had an understanding or perception that formed the basis of my worldview, yet felt it existed in isolation until learning about a theory, practice, or educational philosophy. Non-formal learning is an example of this. I have always thrived in formal learning environments, but been most drawn to the knowledge, insight, and intellectual and emotional rigor abundantly available in daily life - the moments in between, as it were. Experiencing a place where the experiences from daily life - things I had previously only found welcomed in improvisational acting classes - were not only

accepted but welcomed, cherished even, as sacred knowledge on par with the knowledge offered through text books and other more traditional learning methods. I realized I was not alone, and was enlivened to learn this was not a brand new phenomenon or viewpoint, but something others had been studying and espousing for decades.

In the context of training, the patterns that comprise the worldview, behavior, thoughts, and reactions of the trainer do not get checked at the door of a learning engagement - they are fully present and contribute to the process of co-creation. The way we are, what we bring to space, and how we think and behave in shared spaces, emanates beyond ourselves. For me, it is essential to understand my personal patterns to develop more consistent practices of personal liberation, which in turn helps me enact liberatory practices in learning environments and co-creative spaces, as opposed to perpetuating patterns of oppression, consciously or unconsciously. For trainers like myself that seek to embody the engaged pedagogy of hooks, personal patterns form an integral part of the training experience, as a trainer-learner is expected to bring their whole self to the space, toward reciprocity in expecting learner-teachers to do the same. Additionally, in being more aware of the patterns and struggles to understand and transgress them in our own contexts, we can better understand the effect patterns have for each participant's own life, as well as the collective experience of the learning community. Therefore it is essential for me to be as aware and intentional with my personal patterns in order to co-create learning environments that are geared to positive transgression of oppressive patterns, toward liberatory experiences.

It is useful to briefly dissect the basic qualities of these two states: self-oppression and personal liberation. In my experience, self-oppression springs from putting expectations, certainty, and predictability on a reality that is unexpected, uncertain, and unpredictable. As my

conscious mind convinces me that I already know how moments, interactions, days, and my own life is going to play out, I - often unconsciously - decide it is not necessary for me to participate consciously, or at all, in the moments, interactions, and experience of my own life. Once I unconsciously decide I do not need to be 'on,' for a moment or for months, then I spend time as a passive-consumer, rather than an active-producer. Conversely, in the state of liberation, I have far less interest in consuming, and instead want to produce - by engaging in conversation, writing, thinking, or participating in the world. I find it much easier to feel connected in the state of liberation. Whether I am with others or alone, I can understand an embodied state of interconnection. I consistently want to be 'on' because I feel engaged, and excited to be a part of the thrilling dance of becoming in daily life. During discussions in Training of Trainers: Ethics at SIT we investigated what "full participation" means as well as what effects being a passive consumer can have in a collective learning environment. Full participation does not necessarily mean speaking, it refers to the bringing of one's full self, as well as attuning one's full attention within the shared environment toward inclusive, active engagement in the collective experience. Passive consumption in a learning environment - for example by withholding any degree of vulnerability, whether shared verbally or not - creates disconnection in a collective sense as well as a disengaged, less powerful learning experience for the individual. Passive-consumption limits the potential Lewinian movement of the group as well as the individual, something I have experienced in both classroom learning environments as well as daily life.

Theoretical principles learned during my time at SIT have been crucial to my development as a social justice trainer, giving me a strong foundation and structure to ground my personal and professional practices. These principles function as the frameworks which

collectively form my practice as a trainer, and are vital to understanding my philosophy and embodiment of training as a whole.

## Part Two: Foundational Theories

The following concepts provide the theoretical foundation for me as a trainer, and the basis of this CLC.

- **bell hooks, Engaged Pedagogy:** hooks (1994) outlines engaged pedagogy as “not merely to share information, but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (p. 14). Engaged pedagogy calls for the integration of life lessons into formalized, classroom experiences, making learning a way of being. This counters a form of traditional pedagogy, which sees knowledge as something to be possessed. Outlined in greater detail, below.
- **Emergent learning:** an element of engaged pedagogy and a practice aligned with hooks (1994). Emergent learning describes an educational process and philosophy that involves open-ended questions and real-time responsiveness to emerging interests in a learning experience, enabling participants to shape the experience in coordination with the educator, trainer, or facilitator.

Armson (2009) describes viewing organizations as adaptive systems, with emergent learning taking place in a ‘space for novelty’ with the following qualities:

This ‘space’ is characterised by being at the edge of chaos; by being concurrently in a stable and unstable state (a paradox); by being driven by what seem to be contradictory dynamics of competition and cooperation, amplification and constraint, exposure to creative tension and protection from it. The result is emergent outcomes or a ‘space’ in which emergent learning can occur. (p. 4)

- **Paulo Freire, Praxis, ‘Banking’:** Throughout this paper, Paulo Freire’s exploration of freedom, oppression, liberation education, and the concept of praxis are used as foundational reference points. Freire (1970) has defined praxis as “...reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126).

Freire defined a common, traditional educational practice known as a ‘banking system’ of education. hooks, a colleague of Freire’s, described the banking system as “based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored, and used at a later date.” (hooks, 1994, p. 5). Freire’s pedagogy focuses on fostering the participatory nature of an educational process, seeing the learner as a human being with unique needs, abilities, experiences, and voices that contain useful information vital to the individual and shared learning environment. Freire also sought to level the power structures previously inherent in many educational

practices, which most commonly place the teacher as authority, all-powerful, the pillar of knowledge, and students as subjected to the authority, there solely to learn what the teacher had to offer. Freire signifies this philosophical shift by referring to teachers as teacher-learners, and students as learner-teachers, outlining the more collaborative environment in a participatory learning experience, one which relies upon the knowledge and experience of all toward generating new knowledge as a collective, and for each individual, unique to each person's experience. A key tenet of Freire's pedagogy holds that "education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor - learner-teachers and teacher-learners alike." (Freire, 1970)

- **Non-duality:** Suzuki (1995) suggests suffering is rooted in our dualistic approach to experience and being, categorizing things as either-or, one or the other but not both:

This is the most important teaching: not two, and not one. Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think that they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind are both two and one. We usually think that if something is not one, it is more than one; if it is not singular, it is plural. But in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular. Each one of us is both dependent and independent. (p. 7)

In the context of this paper, non-duality is necessary for co-creating engaged conversation that is both reliable and dynamic. For example, I have developed an ability to give the person I am speaking with my full attention, while also creating follow-up questions internally as the conversation is unfolding, based on the information being generated in real-time. In a way, this aligns with emergent learning as well, allowing the conversation to flow as it unfolds while also maintaining intentionality within the engagement. This form of non-duality, giving full attention and presence while also fluidly creating questions in one's mind, is a skill I have developed over time, and essential to connecting conversationally in a way that is uncommon, and rife with potential for movement.

- **Experiential Learning Theory:** Kolb (2012) created a model for experiential learning theory in 1984. The theory outlines the internal cognitive processes of learning, defined in a four-stage learning cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. Each stage of the cycle contributes to the next, and it is possible to enter at any stage of the cycle, so long as the learner goes on to experience each stage. Kolb (2012), referencing Dewey to be the first to describe the experiential learning spiral, outlines it as "the ongoing recursive operation of the experiential learning cycle," in which "each trip through the cycle returns to the experience with new insight gained by reflection, thought, and action," ultimately showing "how learning from experience leads to development" by "transforming the impulses, feelings, and desires of concrete experience into higher order purposeful action" (pp. 1212-1214).

- **Social Justice:**

As discussed in *Training of Trainers: Ethics*, Adams and Bell (2007) define social justice as:

“Social Justice is both a goal and a process. The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change.” (p. 3)

- **Kurt Lewin’s ‘Change as Three Steps’ Model:**

Lewin’s Change Model (1947), which summarizes change into three stages; unfreezing, change (or movement) and freezing, was analyzed in *ICHR 5025 Training Design in Experiential Learning (TDEL)*. In the context of individual or group development, unfreezing refers to a moment or series or period of time when a previous pattern of behavior or thought is loosened. This stage is essential in getting to the next stage, movement, or change. After movement has happened, through exploration and engagement with new possibilities, the new pattern can be refrozen and carried with the individual or group moving forward. For example, traveling to a different country could be an experience that would cause an individual to unfreeze certain unconscious patterns of thought and behavior, particularly if the country is unfamiliar in terms of language, geography, or additional contexts. While the individual is unfrozen, they reach an exploratory phase, where there is the potential for change. Once the new internal contexts are explored in tandem with the new external impetus, a new pattern may become more appealing or begin to settle in. Once this new pattern begins to coalesce within the individual or group, refreezing has taken place, and will continue to happen over time. While the stages are interconnected, they may last varying periods of time, and can continually be triggered through reflective investigation or a new experience at any point moving forward.

## **Expanded Consideration of Theory**

In this section I expand upon selected theoretical principles while drawing connections to my practice and grounding as a trainer.

### **Social Justice Education.**

Social justice education examines “how oppression operates in both the social system and in the personal lives of people from diverse communities” toward enabling “individuals to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand the structural forces of oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems” (Bell & Adams, 2007, p. 4). Additionally,

social justice education aims to “help participants develop awareness, knowledge, and processes to examine issues of justice/injustice” while also connecting “analysis to action” (Bell & Adams, 2007, p. 4). As a social justice trainer, I utilize the transformative power of uncommonly engaged, exploratory conversation toward achieving the goals outlined here. Additionally, my conversational style of training is highly-accessible, which aligns with inclusivity and diverse empowerment principles of social justice education. Whereas more formalized versions of education require classrooms, materials, and possibly money, my conversational training can happen anywhere at any time with anyone with no cost other than time and attention. With the continued development of online technology, I can co-create participation globally. The fluidity and accessibility of engaged conversation is a cornerstone of my practice as a social justice trainer.

### **hooks.**

Transgression of oppressive systems and practices toward those that are liberatory in nature is a central part of hooks’ engaged pedagogy. Engaged pedagogy, as described by hooks, is an educational practice that transgresses the commonly-held notions of an educator-as-emotionally-removed-lecturer applying practices aligned with the banking system style of education. hooks describes the classroom as an environment that must be a place that is exciting, rather than boring. This contrasted widely-accepted notions that an “atmosphere of seriousness” was “assumed to be essential to the learning process.” (hooks, 1994, p. 7). Engaged pedagogy necessitates that each classroom is recognized as different, that “the strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience.” (hooks, 1994, pp. 10-11). Additionally, each person’s presence has to be acknowledged in order to be considered a radical pedagogy. This acknowledgment must take place in the pedagogical practices,

contributing to an environment where everyone influences the classroom dynamic in ongoing, recognized fashion. In order for this to take place, deconstruction of the “traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics” must take place (hooks, 1994, p. 8)

I have a minor point of contention, or a counterpoint to hooks’ following assertion:

“To teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think, write, speak. The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself.” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). While I agree with the intent of her approach in this context, I have found adopting this as a universal best practice can potentially cause mistrust and a distancing degree of uncertainty for others. Prior to learning about hooks and engaged pedagogy, I strived to be in touch with the moment as fluidly as possible, adapting to the constant state of happening. While this was frequently a great strategy toward generating engagement and a source of excitement in interaction with others, when presented to a community with some consistency, I felt a decreasing level of trust from others, a questioning of my authenticity, and increasing uncertainty in relational bonds. I have learned that attuned-fluidity is a wonderful underlying practice to maintain closer alignment with the dynamic nature of being, but consistency and predictability can function as characteristics or qualities aligned with certainty that help build bonds and foster a level of engagement that is hard to achieve with total fluidity. This is, of course, highly contextual, as in contexts where predictability reigns supreme, fluidity will be quite engaging and hungered for, and vice versa.

Additionally, I have experienced situations where someone trying to “meet others where they are” by intentionally-curating their questions or topics of conversation, actually ends up being limiting or oppressive, rather than liberatory, by consciously or unintentionally putting others in a metaphorical box. I vividly remember speaking with SIT colleagues from various

parts of the world that have experienced this in their lives. They shared examples of other people's attempts to consistently celebrate their affiliation with their home country leading to them feeling suffocated by a form of forced identity, as always being seen and spoken to as the "the friend from China," for example. For me, this reinforced the notion of respectfully asking rather than assuming, and being mindful to interact with each person as a human being first and foremost, ensuring I listen and watch for others to choose and express what they want to represent and how they are engaged with interpersonally. It is somewhat ironic and paradoxical that one's attempt to celebrate and honor diversity would instead create an experience of "othering" and a form of oppression, which I why I am thankful for this lesson. I have also seen this with native English speakers communicating to non-native, but proficient, English speakers. The native English speaker may at some point experience other native English speakers failing to consider the non-native's unfamiliarity with certain terms or topics. In future instances, out of attempted mindfulness, the native speaker may ask overly simplistic questions, or constantly explain terms and cultural touchstones, thus limiting the conversational experience and potentially making the non-native speaker feel even more isolated and different. If this behavior is adopted in an educational setting, say, by a trainer, an intent to be mindful and inclusive may counterintuitively be oppressive, or limit someone else's ability to share or express, which limits the collective and individual learning potential alike.

To avoid this, a high level of contextual awareness combined with the ability to intuit and communicate is required, as is consistently challenging the trainer's own assumptions. What works in one context may not in another, and the only way to learn what is appropriate in each is to conduct varying forms of needs assessment, by posing an intentional-yet-subtle question, or intuiting the energy in a room and individual learners when certain topics are addressed, and

even being mindfully direct with individuals one may presumptively “cater for” in terms of adjusting one’s style of communication. An important difference between practicing this in an oppressive versus a liberatory way, is affixing one’s own perceptions onto a dynamic learning environment, as opposed to being receptive and increasingly aware of the emergence of contextual clues and insights. The insights are revealed in an emerging way, which can then determine the trainer’s communicative style and voice, which will continually adapt throughout the experience. The application of hooks’ assertion does result in something I agree completely with, that a dynamic approach to voice leads to the deconstruction of stagnant power dynamics, biases, and oppressive, preconceived notions.

### **Emergent Learning.**

Emergent learning occupies a central place in my way of being as a person and trainer. I see utilizing emergent principles as participation in the co-creation of emergent spaces of growth, aligned with the emergent nature of being and the process of becoming. The Kolb Learning Style Inventory is a tool created by David and Alice Kolb, based on experiential learning principles, to help people better understand how they learn from experience. According to the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, there are four learning styles: Diverging, Assimilating, Converging, and Accommodating. I am an Accommodator. Accommodators are closely linked with the Concrete Experience and Active Experimentation portions of the ELC. Those with the Accommodator learning style are characterized as preferring to learn by doing. They are hands-on, thriving in ambiguity and improvisation, open to risk-taking, and learning through experimentation. As an Accommodator, I thrive in emergent scenarios, prefer to learn by trial-and-error, and feel most liberated in learning environments where exploration and emergence are fostered as opposed to rigid structure (Kolb, 2013). While emergent learning is well-suited to my learning style, it can

potentially cause challenge for other learning styles less-inclined to hands-on experimental experiences. For example, Divergers prefer watching to doing, and utilize imagination to consider various perspectives before coming to a solution. Assimilators are highly logical, preferring clear explanation rather than practical opportunity and lectures or reading to active, Accomodator-style participation. It is helpful for me to keep these differences in mind during the design and implementation of experiential training engagements, so I co-create an environment that is inclusive of diverse learning styles toward greater overall engagement and growth.

### **Lewin.**

I have found it helpful to apply Lewin's change model as diversely and creatively as possible, looking at the three phases of this model across contexts. As my current practice of training is in conversational form, it will be informative to explore an example of this within interpersonal communication. When meeting an individual for the first time, there may be some emotional and intellectual distance between two people. The first parts of the conversation will most likely need to effect some form of unfreezing, by establishing familiarity and a shared approach to communicating. Once some familiarity is established, the conversational connection can reach a point of movement or change. Here communication can be a form of shared journey, more exploratory and potentially even a sensation of shared risk. Finally, after the movement, either within the flow of conversation or at the end, a refreezing takes place, both shared in terms of a new pattern of relationship, as well as individually as the conversational journey lives on in each person moving forward.

It is also useful for me to use the Lewinian lens and zoom out, looking at a period of thirty years of my life in the three stages he outlined relative to personal and group change. I was frozen in a very disciplined, organized manner for much of my youth. Throughout high school

and college I began practicing the deconstruction of personal patterns. Once I graduated from college I became unfrozen, and started a period of extended Lewinian movement over the past fifteen years. This time has been marked by tremendous growth and exploration, which has also led to experiences of self-destruction in the process of learning my personal boundaries. Over the past two-and-a-half years, my work has been focused on re-establishing discipline, or refreezing, in a way that allows me to participate in daily life and community at the intersection of personal liberation, self-actualization, and usefulness to things beyond myself.

### **On Consciousness**

The psychologist Carl Jung is one of the foremost scholars in the realm of human consciousness. Jung is relevant in my journey as much of his work dealt with the inner workings and relationship of the conscious and unconscious mind. He also shares a link with hooks, as both hold the process of self-actualization in high regard. For hooks (1994), self-actualization is an essential part of engaged pedagogy:

Engaged pedagogy “emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.” (p. 15)

For Jung (2014), self-actualization is the result of a process he termed “individuation.” Individuation refers to the process of integrating personal fragmentations, or personas, into a cohesive whole. Jung (2014) uses the term as in-dividuation, as in “becoming an *in-dividual*” which, “embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one’s own self” as in “‘coming to one’s self’ or ‘self-realization.’” Fragmentation includes examples of “the self retiring into the background while giving place to social recognition.” These fragments or personas are alienations of the self, “ways of divesting the self of its reality in favor of an external role or an imagined meaning.” (p. 173)

Relating this to my journey, I can see the disparate threads of my life experience as the exploration and manifestation of fragmented versions of myself. My personas - such as athlete, comedian, student - can be compared to roles which I play, depending on the context and scenario. Through reflective analysis, I have discovered a pattern of my continuously creating new personas. Frequently I will embed myself in a context, moving to a new city for example. This initial experience is marked by feelings of freedom, liberation. As time passes, the newness wears off, and the unpredictable begins to fall into conscious patterns, which feels limiting, and ultimately oppressive. I then create a new persona, either by changing social groups or by changing my overall context through moving to a new city, starting a new job, and embodying a new persona. While useful in an experimental, developmental sense, the manifestation of these personas creates a disconnection of the self, with various versions carrying their own energies in their own directions, which creates a disjointed, disparate experience for the individual. It is like never being at rest, something which is noticeable for me internally, and affects the energy and presence I bring to various spaces as well. My internal state impacts my external state, the energy and presence I give off toward others. I have noticed that in being unsettled internally, I would frequently unsettle others around me, in both positive and negative ways. As a trainer, it is vital for me to do the internal work necessary to bring a more aligned, cohesive self into learning spaces by practicing personal integration.

For me, integration toward self-actualization has taken place in two contexts: internal integration toward the cohesive alignment of disparate personas, and external integration in aligning myself with communities and the world as a consistent, active participant in a way that is sustainable and more thriving than endurance. During my time at SIT and throughout my reflective practice, I have focused on the latter, my place in the human community on a

professional and personal basis. I learned what was necessary for me to integrate my various fragments toward a more cohesive way of being was to broaden my disparate personas beyond their typically-isolated zones of operation. To achieve sustainable self-actualization, I needed to practice introducing my fragments in contexts in which other personas would typically reign. For example, if I was only humorous in particular contexts, I have begun to experiment showing that side of my personality in contexts which I would normally be serious or quiet. By doing this, I am broadening the silo of this persona toward a more integrated, interconnected sense of self.

Understanding the relationship between my conscious and unconscious mind helps me to learn how to practice thinking and behaving in ways that result in more sustainable experiences of freedom. The conscious mind, the navigator or planner, is constantly seeking patterns, utilizing them to make personal order out of the seeming chaos of existence to help us map our experience of the world - for better and worse. Once our conscious mind establishes a pattern in a portion of our experience where there was previously none, it continues on toward new impetus to undertake the mapping, categorizing, and creation of order. These patterns help us create models of reality which aid in our functionality by building a sense of pattern and predictability into an otherwise disparate, unpredictable experience of being (Jung, 2014). This is useful when determining routes to get to work, acclimating one's self in new surroundings, getting to know and building trust with a person, and ultimately, getting to know one's self. While identifying patterns is helpful in one sense, the creation of predictability also has a disenchanting result when applied across one's experience of daily being. When I can remember whether to turn right or left at a particular intersection, and which street gets me to work, that can be helpful. When I know the route to work to such a degree that I can function on autopilot, that fosters a practice of disengagement, which leads to disconnection, tuning out.

The unconscious mind is far less predictable and far more challenging to understand. However, it is clear the unconscious has a powerful effect on the way we experience and relate to ourselves and others, heavily informing our experience of the world. Jung (2014) refers to the mystery of the unconscious, and the challenge of ever understanding it, or our full version of self, saying:

We never get farther than the hypothetical ‘as if.’...There is little hope of our ever being able to reach even approximate consciousness of the self, since however much we may make conscious there will always exist an indeterminate and indeterminable amount of unconscious material which belongs to the totality of the self. Hence the self will always remain a supraordinate quantity. (p. 177)

One of the few things we know with certainty about the unconscious is that it never rests, continuing to work even when we sleep, exhibited in the existence of dreams. The relationship between the unconscious and conscious mind is compensatory rather than contradictory, as they complement one another, “forming a totality which is the self” (Jung, 2014). In Jung’s view, no matter how much self-knowledge we gain, there is little chance in us reaching “even approximate consciousness of the self” because of the indeterminate and unknowable element of the unconscious, which is a necessary part of the self (Jung, 2014).

Looking at consciousness through an intercultural communication and experiential learning trainer lens, there are connections with The Four Stages of Competence model, often attributed to William Howell (1982). The four stages are: Stage One Unconscious Incompetence, Stage Two Conscious Incompetence, Stage Three Conscious Competence, and Stage Four Unconscious Competence. The model outlines the cognitive movement that happens for learners throughout a learning experience. Before a learning experience takes place, learners are unaware of their gaps in skill or knowledge and attempt to solve problems intuitively with little insight into underlying issues – Unconscious Incompetence. Learners become aware of the knowledge

or skill gap (Conscious Incompetence), and once they acquire the lacking skill or knowledge (Conscious Competence) they ultimately gain enough experience utilizing it they can do so unconsciously (Unconscious Competence) (Howell, 1982).

Relating this model to the example of taking the same route to work and ending up on autopilot, disengaged from life yields an interesting result. One can reach a level of comfort driving that aligns with Stage Four, Unconscious Competence. However, the repetitive execution of that behavior without some consistent attunement of active mindfulness can transform driving from Stage Four back to Stage One, Unconscious Incompetence, which results in disconnection and autopilot behavior in a potentially-destructive sense. For example, I have driven the same route so often that it becomes the path I drive no matter where I am going, even if my destination is in the opposite direction. In this state, my unconscious pattern was in complete control of my behavior. While this driving example may just result in my laughing at myself as I adjust course in a more direct path to my new, uncommon destination, the unconscious transformation from Stage Four to Stage One can have perilous results in other contexts. If I reach Stage Four in being able to share conversation with a loved one, without consistent mindful attunement it could revert back to Stage One, where I am nodding along and mindlessly responding or asking questions, unconsciously attuned in a pattern that requires conscious attention for connection. Perhaps my annoyed partner would ask “Are you even paying attention?” which could cause me to snap back to the moment. I may then realize I had not been paying attention for some period of time, putting me back through Stage Two to Stage Three, Conscious Competence, as I refocus on participating fully in conversation. This can also apply in one’s experience of life, as fluidly navigating the cycle of one’s days for years leads to Unconscious Competence while existing within one’s life routines. The more one maintains these patterns of being without mindful

attention, one may begin to feel disconnected, robotic, just going through the motions. This aligns with a transformation from Unconscious Competence to Unconscious Incompetence. A trainer may be at Stage Four and lull one's self into a false sense of comfort and prepare less rigorously for a familiar training topic, feeling they have achieved a mastery that requires less frequent mindful attention. However, the lack of active mental participation may cause the trainer to lose touch with competency at a Stage Four level, and realize at some point they are not fully participating in the training experience.

In the context of my conversational style of training, one of the largest challenges I have found in myself and others is combating my mind's patterned certainty that it knows what another person will say or how they will behave before they actually do anything. I feel I am at a Stage Four, Unconscious Competence, relative to some aspects of engaged conversation – such as developing questions in the moment, exhibiting external indicators of attunement and attention. However, it can be a challenge to prevent my mind from leaping ahead in conversation, as my consciousness operates atop the patterns of history and experience, assuming it knows approximately what a person will say based, as though this person's response is already mapped. When this happens, my conscious mind will urge me to map the next few interactions, or even the rest of the conversation, to identify where it will lead or where I should ultimately steer it. If I am not in the practice of maintaining mindful attunement, I will end up externally exhibiting a Stage Four level of engagement, when internally I have regressed to a Stage One Unconscious Incompetence, mentally in another place and completely out of sync with the conversation's present moment of becoming. It requires vigilance to practice consistent engagement and full participation in conversation. What helps me is fixing my conscious mind's ceaseless need to organize and map on the ever-new information flowing from the person I am

talking with, focusing it toward finding connections and patterns within the conversation or within a split second exploring connections between the new knowledge being developed and other experiences, insights, and thoughts I have had.

To engender a conscious-and-transfixed experience in life and training engagements, I need to practice introducing contrast to my consciously-mapped experiences. Contrast in the form of diverse experiences and thought helps me consistently view the world with fresh eyes and re-examine the categories and certainties my conscious mind has placed upon myself, others, and the experience as a whole. Contrast is a great teacher, offering difference and a form of discomfort, which inspires consciousness, from which we can derive an understanding of options that we may prefer, or increased awareness of our previously held understanding toward consciously choosing a similar option again. As a trainer, this can mean being aware of the methods and approaches I use, and continuously diversifying my training style, toward connecting with diverse learners as effectively as possible and co-creating an inclusive, diversely-participatory learning environment. In my form of training, I need to consistently adjust my lines of inquiry, the spaces in which I hold conversational engagements, the and the populations with which I am connecting. By maintaining a thorough awareness of my patterns as a trainer, I am better equipped to continually inject contrast toward consistently-conscious engagement and effectiveness in diverse contexts.

Experiences that offer a form of synchronous-asynchronicity, or asynchronous-synchronicity are especially effective in generating Lewinian movement. It is important to note that each portion, the synchronicity as well as the asynchronicity, is vital for me to create sustainable conditions for movement. An example of this is travel, as I have often experienced traveling to a new location frees up my mind and offers me a refreshing vantage point from

which to reflect and alter my personal path. As a trainer, I often begin a conversation by doing an instantaneous, very informal ‘needs assessment’ to get as much contextual information as possible. I should note that my style is heavily-based in emergent learning, so structures outlined here likely fluctuate wildly from one conversation to the next. My goal at the outset of a conversational training engagement, especially with individuals I have not yet met before, is to establish synchronicity, trust, and a disarmed sense of connection. I aim to do this as quickly as possible without rushing, so, we can move collectively into a more fluid, engaged, exploratory space. The ‘needs assessment’ is essentially my observing the body language and sensing the energy of the person or group I am about to engage with, as well as the environment and setting, so that I can attune myself as properly as possible to the myriad contexts involved. I may ask a general question such as “How are you?” in a friendly tone, to immediately offer a non-threatening presence and disarming welcoming into the conversational space. Sometimes I may open with an asynchronous question such as “What have you noticed recently?” in order to disrupt any unconscious patterns that may be happening internally, gain one’s attention, and cut through the routine niceties that often accompany first-time conversations. At times, this is my attempt at a somewhat radical venture into immediate, deep conversation with a relative stranger. If they ask something in response, I make sure to answer in a manner that is authentic and thoughtful, quickly establishing rapport and setting the spatial tone toward equal comfort in asking and responding to questions. Because I am tall, I will often slightly hunch or dip my head to match the other person’s eye level, though it is essential to do this subtly and not in an awkward way. I will also ask questions that are more comfortable and rapport-establishing in nature, such as inquiries on one’s background. I make sure to verbalize that I enjoy answering questions as well and am an open book, encouraging the participant(s) to take an equal role in the

power dynamic of moving conversation forward in an exploratory, shared sense. As the experience continues, if I notice attention waning I can introduce asynchronicity in the form of an uncommon question or a uniquely personal response followed by a request for the participant to relate or connect with my response in their own personal context. This form of asynchronicity can inspire renewed attention on the other end, and the entire engagement will be a dance between synchronicity and asynchronicity, with choices toward either determined by the emerging flow of conversation and the shared moment.

It is vital to manage the conversational connection and flow mindfully like a dance, alternating fluidly between synchronous and asynchronous elements to co-create an experience that is both safe and adventurous, trusting and uncertain, comforting and delightful, a journey that is both individual and shared collectively with equitable, liberating participation. Too much asynchronicity can be overwhelming, causing one to shut down or withdraw further into synchronous patterns of being. This can be evidenced in the example of traveling to a country where I have no reason for being, knowing no person nor the language, and any variety of contexts that are totally asynchronous to my norms. In conversational training, asking an askew question, introducing a disconnecting energy or expression of body language, or offering vocal tone in a manner that is too asynchronous can damage the conversational connection and cause the participant to retreat into the individual, separate synchronicity of their own comfort. The right balance of synchronicity and asynchronicity helps my conscious mind find safety in the 'known' and predictable, the mappable, while offering delight in the form of contrast enough to maintain excited engagement and providing space for the unconscious to actively roam. Reaching this state of conversational connection is akin to achieving Stage Four, Unconscious Competence, in The Stages of Competence Model. The predictable, mapped qualities of this

level of conversation allows each participant to function in a way that is aligned with unconsciousness, while simultaneously the unpredictable, exploratory uncertainty of inquiry and co-creation inspire consciousness. This results in Lewinian movement that feels thrilling, edifying, liberating, and other-centering all at once. When trainer and each participant is in engaged conversation, it appears effortless, exciting, with thoughtful, at times vulnerable responses and exploratory reflection happening fluidly. Unconscious Competence in conversational training seems natural and freeing, and often results in participants losing track of time, with participants and trainer alike sharing remarks such as, “I cannot believe we have been talking this long” or “I am not sure why I felt so comfortable sharing everything I did.”

### Part Three: Personal Narrative

For as long as I can remember, I have been driven by an insatiable curiosity about myself and the world, exploring in attempt to understand my place within the systems, communities, and mystery of which experience is comprised. Curiosity has led to questioning and experimentation, which has led to deviation from the cultural boxes and societal roles frequently ascribed to me. The practice of deviation and an observant has brought me vital self-understanding and personal growth, but it has also resulted in a pattern of frequent isolation, never really feeling part of any community despite being a valued part of many. As I have grown into adulthood, finding a healthy balance between my propensity for exploring the world alone and developing generative connections with enriching communities has been a struggle, but remains an aim toward which I am increasingly focused.

In grade school, I developed an interest in untangling various levels of cultural conditioning to better understand the nature of myself, and consciously examine the belief systems I was born into and unconsciously accepted. Initially, my untangling took the form of

quiet reflection and internal investigation, hidden away from the eyes and ears of those that surrounded me. As I examined and more consciously adopted or discarded portions of my worldview, my shifts were subtle. I became slightly more quiet, I spent a little more time alone. I was also very routine-oriented and organized throughout my youth. This way of being was applauded by others, and seemingly in lockstep with personal progress within professional and social ranks. But I began to feel more and more robotic, and the same systems I employed to thrive in areas like school and athletics - routine, strict discipline, mindful preparation, detail-orientation - seemed to restrict me in the areas I felt most lacking, social connection and exploration of personal identity.

My father was wonderful, but he also toiled at a job he seemed not to care for because of the expectations he associated with marriage, having a mortgage, supporting children, and achieving some socially-acceptable standard of living. Grade school is one of the first times I can remember realizing this, and untangling some of the Midwestern United States, middle-class societal norms and expectations that were sown within me. As I became increasingly aware of the expectations placed on me by others, I began to feel increasingly constrained by them. I soon grew to view expectations as forms of constraint. I wondered: Who determines this standard of living which then determines how so many people seem to live their lives? Why do people surrender the majority of their adult lives at work doing something they do not care about, to maintain a lifestyle that seems to make them miserable and which they actively escape from? My father, and the vast majority of adults around me seemed to be wilting in cages they built themselves, refusing to walk outside them despite the metaphorical doors being unlocked and open.

I decided early on that was not how I would live my life. I did not want to resign what seemed to be a magical, special thing - the mystery of being alive - to upholding the expectations of others at the expense of personal discovery and purpose. I saw how frequently living a life based on others' expectations led to resentment, and a resignation to bitterly live within the confines of some unalterable system or systems. I realized the expectations that seemed to dictate the worldview and behavior of most everyone in my societal purview at that time did not have to apply to me. I did not have to give power, meaning, and weight where others did. I could decide for myself what I cared about, to whom and what I gave weight and power. This is one of the first times I realized that power is not inherent, it is something we give to others, to systems, by adhering to them. I wanted to make sure I was giving power over how I lived my life to things that I agreed with, things that I found to be true and cared about. I became interested in answering the question, "What *must* I do or be, if anything?"

Once my senior year of high school rolled around, I was one of the top U.S. football players in Michigan, and was being offered full athletic scholarships to attend college. I felt the pull of long-desired autonomy, which aligned with exploration beyond my previous regiments and disciplined, organized, patterns of being. I chose to attend Duke University, relatively far from my home in suburban Detroit, Michigan, with the hopes of more fully investigating and understanding myself. My freshman year I took a class on Confucianism, and was profoundly moved. I had never been exposed to so-called "Eastern" thought or philosophy before. I soon chose to major in Religion, with a focus on Eastern Religions, specifically Buddhism. Learning about a worldview focused on personal investigation, being in the present, impermanence, and non-duality was thrilling. Suddenly I had language and structure for things that previously swam formless and deeply within me.

Investigating authenticity and what it means to be an authentic person became passions of mine. When I would be my truest self, I seemed to be cutting against some invisible grain in the eyes of others, interrupting a system built on patterned fulfillment of unspoken expectations. I have often felt like a catalyst for contrast, due to things within and beyond my control. In college, I was a student-athlete, studying Buddhism while attempting to balance what felt like a fundamental gap between who I was becoming and how I had to spend time in order to maintain my athletic scholarship. Being a football player was never something I felt aligned with identity-wise. Because of my athletic ability and my physical characteristics - I am male, six-feet four-inches tall, and was one of the bigger, stronger players on my team, sporting a shaved head as well - I frequently felt the unspoken expectations that I live up to a certain kind of leadership and general way of being; namely, that of dominance and authority. However, I was shy, deeply-opposed to interpersonal dominance and authoritative forms of leadership. I began to realize how often I was put in certain categories, boxes, by others upon first glance. When I would exhibit qualities like silliness, friendliness, and a preference for asking and listening rather than telling others what to do, I could see it cause confusion. It was as though people were unconsciously in the flow of ticking off a machine-like checklist, which I unconsciously threw a wrench into. I see this now as indicative of the challenge of maintaining a mindset of non-duality. It requires a form of non-duality for others to perceive me complexly, rather than defined by overly-simplistic qualities. Realizing this was a pivotal lesson for me, understanding that others resemble the complexity I did. In being intimately familiar with the oppressive feeling of being put in boxes I did not fit within, I vowed to instead see and interact with others in a more undefined, open way. This is an example of the critical analysis that is a vital part of social justice training, and being a social justice trainer.

Throughout my undergraduate experience, I felt conflicted between two worlds; the athletic world which consumed much of my non-classroom time, and the burgeoning sense of self I was developing. I would spend the morning and afternoon learning about the Buddhist concept of samsara, which espouses that life is suffering because of our dualistic understanding of the world - namely, that there is a disconnection between self and other - and then immediately transition to slamming into other humans on the football field, attempting to execute a play some tobacco-spitting coach felt was crucial to practice countless times. I sought relief in books written by other athletes and thinkers that had interest in Buddhist principles, and attempted to apply them to athletic preparation and competition. Ultimately, this fell short of sustainable satiation, and I eagerly anticipated graduation as the next step in my experience of autonomy, this time free of the responsibilities and expectations associated with being an athlete.

Graduation offered me freedom from the highly-structured life of a student-athlete as well as from expectations beyond my own. Following graduation, I entered a period of my life I refer to as 'in pursuit of perspective.' This stretch of time encompasses the past sixteen years. It is characterized by frequently moving around the United States and working myriad jobs in varied fields in attempt to dive deeply into diverse ways of experiencing life, learned through reflection on my own personal experiences as well as observation of others and interpersonal conversation. It has also been characterized by two extremes: feeling incredibly connected to myself and the world, and conversely feeling largely disconnected and isolated. The latter of these extremes I refer in this paper to as self-oppression, because the choices that create the conditions for my experiences of this are of my own doing. The state of self-oppression is further characterized by feeling depressed, stuck, desiring escape from expectations or hiding from the world, lacking personal agency, feeling lost, appreciating and noticing very little, with minimal

interest in the world beyond consumption of food and substances that numb or dull my mind and body, at times exhibiting various forms of self-destruction. It is a state largely aligned with unconsciousness and feeling a form of personal vacancy. Conversely, the state of connection, which I will refer to as liberation or freedom, is the exact opposite. In the latter state I feel inspired, highly motivated, appreciative of the smallest details in life, bursting with ideas, on fire and excited to engage with the world, feeling at home everywhere as a part of the broader community of existence, wanting to be outside and exploring, with minimal interest in consuming food or mind- and mood-altering substances, exhibiting numerous forms of personal growth and progress. Self-oppression is a state aligned with unconsciousness, passivity, and feeling like the walking dead. Liberation for me is a state largely aligned with consciousness, action, and feeling intensely alive.

As I moved around the United States over the past decade-and-a-half, certain patterns of thought and behavior have emerged. An important pattern that I have only recently begun to understand and untangle became evident immediately after graduating from Duke and moving to Los Angeles. While driving across the country and arriving in California, I felt abundantly free. With unlimited options on how I could spend my time and my life, I felt liberated. I explored experience and interpersonal interaction in as diverse settings as possible. I untangled personal expectations and transgressed patterns of how days should be spent - for example, working a freelance, graveyard shift job as opposed to the Monday through Friday workweek. This burst of freely-becoming lasted for a handful of months. Then something began to change. What once felt like freedom began to feel oppressive. I began to withdraw, overwhelmed by the ever-sprawling city and abundant options that had previously felt like freedom. Soon I was spending most of my time alone, indoors, watching television and consuming large quantities of food inside the small,

dark, room I had rented in Pasadena. This stretch of self-oppression lasted for months before I knew I had to change something. When I moved, I was again visited by the rush of newness, freedom from my previous state of listlessness. I did not know this yet, but I was exhibiting a pattern that would come to define the next fifteen years of my life.

I had never felt like I fit anywhere, and had not experienced a vision of growing into adulthood that made any sense to me. I looked at systems as means of oppression, specifically on a personal level, even relating to systemic patterns of personality and relating to others and community, so I decided to devote myself to deconstructing the systems that impacted my life. I sought to live in a state of transgression. If I could not find a system I fit into, or wanted to fit into, then I had to design my own, so it seemed. This design frequently took the form of observation, and attunement with my changing contexts. I decided to be an active observer, one which “danced” with what was around me, in front of me. This was very challenging, and unsettling by design, but it helped me feel less alone in the world, to a degree. Then I found something else that helped me transgress this overwhelming feeling of hunger for awareness, a burning, yearning - that something was alcohol. In my mid-twenties, drinking became a form of transgression to hide from my personal pattern of anxious awareness, which made me feel like I was juxtaposed with the world and the world’s expectations. The pattern of alcohol as a warm release, a pattern to pseudo-peace, would continue over the next five or so years in stretches of weeks, and then over the next ten years, from my late twenties through my late thirties.

As a trainer, this struggle has helped me better understand and respond empathetically to others subjected to their own unique experiences of the human condition. Throughout this period of my life, I was subjecting myself to a pattern of being in a state of unconsciousness as quickly and as regularly as I could, to cope with other things in my life. I was escaping consciousness to

avoid the pain associated with feeling like I did not and could not find a slice of reality in which I could be my full self. I felt like I was permanently juxtaposed with the world, and in some ways I still do. This is of vital importance in the context of training, as some participants have likely experienced or are experiencing life in a similar way. This puts tremendous importance on utilizing co-creation and inclusive principles to ensure each participant has an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging – which in some cases may be a rare experience in the world. That is part of the power and beauty of the training space, and the responsibility of the trainer - co-creating a space where all involved have an opportunity to bring their full selves, and shine in the electric peace while sharing, growing, learning, and becoming.

Additionally, a training environment that is focused on conscious engagement and self-examination may be extremely challenging to the uninitiated. Even for those that are consciously interested in participating in such a space, unconscious patterns are incredibly powerful and elusive. My experience of addiction will help me be more patient in training situations where participants seem to be disengaged or seemingly disinterested, as it will help me understand the plethora of contextual layers occurring for each person in the room. My deepened understanding of a struggle to transgress oppression and experience liberation, combined with the knowledge that many others go through similar struggles, can help me frame training to participants within the context of a liberatory vehicle beyond a mere space for generative knowledge - instead presenting a perspective of learning and growth as the practice of freedom.

A few months prior to enrolling at SIT, I transgressed a pattern of alcoholism that heavily impacted the previous decade of my life, by changing my relationship with that substance. It is important to note this change required a holistic investigation, and re-attunement of my self – on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual levels. While I will not cover this in depth in this paper, the

importance of this holistic adjustment cannot be understated. This was not merely an intellectual undertaking, for approaching such a deeply-held personal pattern such as alcoholism from that perspective would leave out essential portions of my way of being in the world that were equal participants in my drinking to escape. Assessing and adjusting my pattern from merely a logical perspective would not lead to sustainable change. In the context of training, this requisite holistic approach aligns with hooks' engaged pedagogy in that it requires the participation of the trainer, or teacher-learner, on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual levels, as well as the engagement with participants, or student-learners, in a similar fashion. If I, as a trainer, only offer the intellectual portion of myself, only approach what happens in a training from logical perspectives, or co-create a learning environment that expects participation on merely intellectual levels, I will miss out on and oppress a significant amount of learning and growth – particularly on attitudinal levels.

I have experienced the exact opposite of being engaged holistically as an educator. In my early twenties, I worked as a teacher at a charter school for “at-risk” high school students. I taught math, and in reflection now see how much of a “banking system” style of education I was propagating – especially in my teaching style. During one lesson on the Pythagorean theorem, I tried engaging a student to ground the lesson more real-life – though I would learn how biased my version of “real-life” was. I was explaining that using the theorem was just like figuring out an unknown distance while mapping the student's daily travel over the past day. I said, “Miles, so you started yesterday at home, then walked to the bus, then...” He interrupted me. “I didn't sleep at home last night,” he said matter-of-factly. The contrast of his honest admission showed me how presumptive I had been. Miles was offering an authentic portion of his reality beyond the intellectual expectations of the classroom environment I had fostered. I could feel the energy

in the classroom shift from tuned out to electric engagement – Miles had transgressed the unconscious expectations of myself as well as his classmates. Instead of using this moment as a gift toward emergent learning, a wonderful opportunity to inject relevance beyond the dry lesson I was hammering into the students' heads, I quickly avoided the situation with a weak “well, wherever you slept...” and continued on about the sides of some hypothetical triangle. The gift Miles had offered soon passed, as did the relevance of anything I was saying at the students, along with their attention - the stifled, subdued classroom environment continued plodding along.

My transition from alcoholism was driven, on the surface, by a simple solution - I stopped drinking for two nights, which has since become the better part of two years. I was immediately emboldened by the resulting consistent awareness that filled the void, the deviation from a long-held pattern of self-suppression, of waking unconsciousness. I realized in a painful rush the degree of consciousness and human experience I had been withholding myself from as a result of being in the warm, tuned out haze of drunkenness for the better part of the past decade, doing unknown levels of damage to my brain and body. Stopping drinking felt like putting on a fresh skin, fresh eyes, and a fresh mind. Once the initial week or two was passed through rigorous exercise and breathing to help me pass the time and find some modicum of sleep, I felt like a new person. In many ways, I was a new person, one that was inspired by remembering the way I felt in college and the few years after spent exploring myself, surrounding landscapes, and others while wondering about meaning and purpose. I felt curious about myself and the world again.

Curiosity has led me to experience a variety of professions, including one as a journalist covering small town and regional North Carolina life for the News of Orange County newspaper,

in Hillsborough, NC. My work conducting interviews and reporting on community-driven stories has influenced my resulting practice as a trainer by deepening my experience of the transformative power of dialogue. Two years ago, in attempt to connect my seemingly-disparate professional experiences into a more cohesive path, I chose to attend SIT. I hoped to gain exposure to new professional paths that would be better suited to my skills, knowledge, expertise, and passions, while working on vital intercultural competencies which I had yet to develop.

## Part Four: Insights and Growth

Since enrolling at SIT I have grown tremendously, as a trainer and a person. My main growth area has been gaining a better understanding, and developing personal capacity for, what it means to participate in daily being - to 'show up' regularly. On a personal level, since transgressing many of my patterns which had contributed to tuning out and escaping daily participation, I have had to fill the resulting void with generative avenues. I have done this by identifying healthier new patterns, hobbies, and habits which lead to my conscious participation in life. This includes engaging my creative side in various art projects, being mindful to take walks and exercise regularly, learning how to recognize when I am falling into a pattern of self-isolation and developing avenues that transgress isolation toward communal connection. My work now entails continuing to identify, build, and embody these new patterns, as I am still in the early phases of living a life intertwined with consistent consciousness. As I continue to practice conscious participation on a daily basis, I will strengthen the patterns that help me experience sustainable liberation.

On a professional level, as a trainer, becoming more consistently conscious has helped me become a better participant as well as a more intentional, attuned co-creator of learning

engagements. I am better at understanding my patterns of engagement and isolation, which has helped me improve at knowing how to intentionally employ self-care into my routine so as to avoid burnout and extended periods of disengagement. In addition to being better able to manage how my personal patterns impact my work in training, I am also more aware and increasingly empathetic of the struggles that others experience, allowing me to be more mindful and better at connecting in professional engagements. I still have much room for improvement, but now I know what it feels like to design co-creative learning environments, to stand in front of dozens of youth leaders from around the world and lead them through experiential activities, to embody emergent principles with great intentionality than before. Perhaps more importantly, I am inching closer to alignment between my personal passions - such as fluid interpersonal dialogue, exploring human connection, and comedy - and actualizing spaces of co-creative communal participation in a professional capacity. In this regard, where I once had a void when considering what I would like to do with my life, I now have tangible direction in way of being that I connect with on levels I previously thought impossible.

I now have language for foundational training concepts - such as experiential learning theory, co-creation, and engaged pedagogy - where before I had none, creating form, function, and connection to the broader training community where I previously had none. Having a deeper understanding of the language related to training terms, concepts, and philosophies has helped me articulate notions that previously only swam in my mind in an isolated fashion. Now I can practice connecting ideas and the excitement surrounding intellectual and emotional exploration with other people, transgressing isolated thought and experience of my own, while offering a bridge for others that may also feel isolated or stuck within themselves. In doing this, practicing the art of co-creation, I find a greater sense of placement within the human and experiential

community of life. As I feel less alone, like I belong, I strive to help others feel less alone, and co-create accessible spaces for belonging and growth.

I have gotten better at being intentional relative to designing, planning, and organizing training-related activities, but I still have much work to do to balance out my personal bias as an Accommodator, toward leaning heavily on emergent learning scenarios and improvisation. Continuing to work toward this balance will help me more effectively co-create learning spaces for learners with diverse learning styles

I have learned that the constraints I previously saw as oppressive - daily routines, maintenance of a long-term profession, living in one place for an extended period of time - can actually be forms of practicing freedom. For example, I am currently practicing walking slowly outside at least one time per day, and paying attention to the sensations associated with my experience of the wind touching my skin, the dancing trees swaying in the breeze, the animals that happen to engage with my vision. While I do this I breathe deeply, at times extending my arms directly out to my sides, in a T-shape, to both open my chest up for deep breathing as well as manifesting a form of welcoming what is seemingly beyond me into me, and opening myself to what is beyond me. This is currently a form of transgression, as my overarching pattern or norm is a worldview marked by isolation from what is beyond me, a distinct intellectual and emotional divide between myself and the world. When I take these walks, I am practicing freedom, from my own patterns and perceptions, my own system of self-oppression and limited worldview.

### **Training Experiences Beyond SIT**

While at SIT, I befriended a colleague that is the founder of a social enterprise named Öğrenme Tasarımları, based in Istanbul. Öğrenme Tasarımları loosely translates to English as

‘Learning Designs,’ and the aim of the organization is to engage youth volunteers across the country in tailor-made experiential activities and engagements that make learning fun. During the summer of 2017, after my first semester at SIT, I was fortunate to travel across five cities in Turkey in partnership with Öğrenme Tasarımları, facilitating team-building workshops using customized, experiential games, while connecting with local NGOs in each city, conducting interviews with various stakeholders and community members, and staying at the homes of Öğrenme Tasarımları volunteers. It was a profound learning experience, on many levels.

In the context of training, it was the first time I had led a formal learning experience beyond SIT’s campus, using the new insight on facilitating experiential learning activities and utilizing group dialogue for processing within the context of a broader engagement. It was also the first time I had worked with a translator, which was a unique learning experience. The environments and participants for the workshops ranged from a classroom filled with thirty high school students and adult staff members at the Turkish Ministry of Youth and Sport, to a hallway at one of the most well-recognized NGOs in the country for fifteen professional staff members.

At each of the locations, at most one or two individuals spoke English fluently, and I barely spoke a few words of Turkish. I immediately noticed what a challenge it was for even this skilled translator to fluidly translate my instructions and questions from English to Turkish on the spot, while participants waited patiently. The first thing I learned was to be far more selective with my words, as the experience of translation showed me how wordy my introductions, instructions, and style of delivering processing questions were. I developed the ability to choose key terms that were more easily communicable across languages, and speak only the most essential elements when introducing each activity and forming processing questions.

My experience in Turkey also opened my eyes and reaffirmed beliefs I held surrounding the transformative power of interpersonal dialogue. While working as a newspaper writer, I had combined more formal informational interviews with less formal, conversational styles of interacting when conducting research and outreach for stories. The result was surprisingly freeing, for myself as well as other participants, and typically yielded more interesting information as well as a more memorable experience. In numerous instances across Turkey I experienced the connective, moving power of engaged, interpersonal conversation. Whether it was speaking with an individual that has been blacklisted by the Turkish government, a Kurdish journalist perilously covering the ongoing battles between the government and Kurdish communities and resistance groups, or a twenty-something university student that hosted me for a few nights, I was continuously moved by the deep bond I was able to quickly make with many people I experienced, and the sense of shared humanity achieved beyond the otherwise disparate contexts between us.

One recent professional experience provided rich learning for me as a workshop facilitator, which I can apply as a trainer in the context of emergent learning. The experience took place in a workshop setting during the 2018 World Bank Group (WBG) Youth Summit, which occurred at The World Bank Headquarters in Washington, D.C. While I was facilitating a workshop, a participant asked a great question. To paraphrase, the question was: “Given the increasing importance of being able to know and share one’s ‘Why,’ what can people with very analytical minds do to be more lively and compelling, in spoken and written communication?” After brief consideration, I offered some thoughts, that were muddled at best. I immediately noticed other hands shooting up to share their insights. We were on a relatively tight time schedule, and had a few other lengthy exercises coming up. I could almost palpably feel the

excitement and engagement rise in the room. This question had touched on something important, and I wanted to honor that. In the moment, I made mention of how clearly engaged people were, myself included, with this topic, and moved on to the next activity.

In retrospect, I could have done better to apply an emergent learning mindset in this case, to allow the momentum, energy, and communal interest of exploring that question to adjust the route of sticking to the agenda. An impactful moment had arisen and could have been pursued for greater insight and overall engagement. I will keep this close in mind when facilitating workshops moving forward by transparently checking with participants on potential course-adjustment in the agenda, when possible.

## Part Five: Building a Practice

After completing my practicum, I decided to explore a curiosity for entrepreneurship that has arisen over the past two years by starting my own professional practice, named Diversify Your Default. The name refers to the need for individuals and organizations to remain mindfully-adaptable in order to thrive and maintain engagement with the abundant, ever-changing diversity natural in being – avoiding the potential pitfalls of remaining in unconscious, limiting, default patterns of thinking, behaving, and operating.

Disconnection is an increasingly powerful characteristic of life in the United States, as is the fracturing of communities, and with disconnection frequently comes isolation. As technological advances continue to make lives more “convenient” interpersonal relationships and human connection tends to suffer. In my experience, human connection is an essential part of being live, and without it, we increasingly feel depressed, despondent, and operate as lonely fragments as opposed to part of a collective human community. Therefore, combating the perils of isolation through engaged conversation is the central mission of my practice. I am deeply

familiar with the negative impacts of being deeply disconnected, and aim to use my personal experiences in tandem with my training as a social justice trainer to co-create community and interpersonal connection with others across the United States and around the world.

One of my first projects with Diversify Your Default has been a conversational video series called “Connective Threads.” This series focuses on transgressing geographical and cultural boundaries by recording interview-conversations I have with individuals from all walks of life, intentionally from various parts of the world. The conversations take place in person when possible, and online when not. They are recorded and edited into five minute episodes, then uploaded to various social media channels – Youtube, LinkedIn, Instagram - to reach a wider audience and spur the co-creation of an interested community. By sharing the conversations I have, featuring diverse perspectives, I hope to offer an accessible, intriguing opportunity for the people to experience uncommonly-engaging, exploratory communication between perspectives. Ideally, this models what is possible when we utilize the power of engaged conversation, and subtly provides examples of methods and techniques for communicating fluidly with others, particularly among people from different communities. This series functions in a marketing capacity as well, providing interesting online content as well as a window into my style and ability as an intercultural communicator and trainer.

Ultimately, I aim to gain clients by offering communication and engagement services. I envision employing a form of dialogue, for individuals as well as groups, that resembles the definition of training offered at the outset of this paper. The dialogue will be characterized by emergent principles, catalyzed by open-ended, uniquely-insightful questions to generate engagement, internal investigation, and communal exploration toward a varied set of goals. For individuals, this would take the form of coaching services, less focused on my offering advice

and more utilizing insightful questions to inspire reflection and personal growth on the part of the client. For groups this can be organized dialogues as well as experiential workshop design and facilitation services, aimed at leadership communication development as well as increasing employee engagement.

### **Conversation as the Practice of Freedom**

For my style of training, engaged conversation is the practice of co-creative freedom. This co-creation can apply in a communal space in the moment, as well as affecting change on individual, personal levels in the moment and continuing on into the reflective future. By listening deeply to someone else when they are sharing, I am not only showing them I am fully present, I am also able to experience their consciousness on a more vivid level, thereby affording me a form of transgression against the self-oppressive pattern, or norm, of being consumed solely within my own consciousness. Therefore, listening is the act of practicing freedom from one's own patterns, systems, thoughts, and consciousness.

By asking questions that fall outside of those that a person may typically expect in conversation, I am transgressing patterns of expectation, which create a heightened sense of consciousness and awareness. Asking people questions they may not regularly consider, I am also able to intentionally spur personal reflection, the seeing oneself in a contrasting, new light, allowing for the deviation of self-expecting patterns and habits, that may be unconscious, and limiting, toward a newly-expanded, liberated sense of self. I try to maintain a non-judgmental approach when engaging in conversation, to develop trust and also be as inclusive as possible. A non-judgmental approach helps me co-create a trusting connection, leading to interpersonal unfreezing and movement, in Lewinian terms.

In my experience, the main element that separates the art of training from serendipitous happenstance is intentionality. In order to function as a trainer, I must exhibit intentionality in the co-creative learning engagements in which I participate.

Intentionality can function in direct relation to patterns and predictability as well. When I am aware of the patterns of myself, I can behave intentionally toward them - in accordance with them or in transgression. By becoming aware and acting intentionally, I am able to embody praxis (Freire, 1970), which helps me be more intentional in shared learning experiences as a trainer. The dance of establishment of pattern and transgression is the cornerstone of my training, and the central concern of my work moving forward as a social justice trainer.

## Conclusion

The reflective process of writing this paper has helped me come to numerous realizations. One that has just struck me as I put the finishing touches on it, is that I am about to embark on a new journey. I was in a very different place personally right before I enrolled at SIT. I had recently transgressed a decade-long pattern of substance abuse that had defined my experience of life. Now, two-and-a-half years later, I am more integrated internally, and within the daily flows of adulthood. I have a deeper understanding of myself, particularly the intersection of the person I would like to practice being daily and a career path that allows me to fully be myself and thrive holistically.

I never thought I could feel at peace and genuinely excited about being fully present in the world on personal and professional levels, as I do now. It is thrilling, and I feel refreshed. In many ways, this is the start of something new, as I continue to explore the daily practice and growing sense of self that accompanies sober, mindful, adult living. In many ways I feel like a child again, in the best way, excited to “try on” the unfolding of each day, looking deeply into

the moments and connections as they emerge, while continually developing my practice toward being engaged as consciously and consistently as possible, while working to transgress self-destructive patterns aligned with unconsciousness. The world feels big again, and I cannot wait to explore.

The development of my practice will be a consistent learning and refinement process, from a business perspective as well as a trainer and human being. Currently, I am most excited to embed a more conversation-focused strategy into my practice, and to get creative about what mediums I am using to employ my trainings within. For example, podcasts are a great medium for the work I do and my conversational style. I look forward to making them a part of my marketing strategy, as well as experimenting with a conversational video series, aimed at offering a window to the connective powers of conversation in “everyday” interactions.

Overall, I am thrilled for the road ahead, and for the learning that will continue to spiral on, through experience and reflection.

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## Appendix A: Insights for Broader Use

This section offers a concise, clear window into learning that has taken place for me, in a more general sense, toward broader applicability. Lessons listed below are in bullet points for greater ease of discovery and consumption.

- Constraints - that may at times feel oppressive - and liberation share a complementary relationship in addition to an antagonistic one. By experiencing constraint, we ready ourselves for the contrasting experience of liberation, and vice versa. As it applies to training, we can intentionally introduce constraints in such a way that they create the conditions for experiences of liberation. For example, putting deadlines on a project, or intentionally creating structured activities for participants, within which they can come to learning and realizations uniquely their own.
- Questions function as forms of inspirational constraints, useful in generating co-creative design in others, and in their responses. Often, to offer a question so wide open would be to inspire a form of limitation, in leaving the inquiry too broad, as people often seem limited or paralyzed by the abundance of potential responses, to the point of being unable or pained to respond. But offering an open-ended specificity is akin to the unique balance between guidance and offering space that is essential for fruitful, empowering co-creation.
- Transgression of patterns creates disruption, a form of chaos, which creates the potential for change, and ultimately new order evidenced in patterns - personally, and systemically.
- The conditions and practices that lead to experiences of liberation and self-oppression may change over time. A practice that once was transgressive and a vehicle for liberation can become a practice that is affiliated with self-oppression. Continuous investigation and adjustment is necessary.
- Transgression requires a norm, or pattern, against which to transgress. Lacking a pattern to counter leads to a pattern of transgressing transgression, which is akin to chasing one's own tail.
- Freedom lies in both the transgression of oppressive patterns as well as in adherence to patterns of liberation. This can apply on personal levels, in terms of patterns of thought or behavior, as well as systemic levels, in terms of community or organizational structure.
- Isolation is the experience of forgetting, ignoring, or failing to see interconnection.

