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NEXUS: POSTMODERN YOUTH WORK AND CREATIVE WORKS

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NEXUS: A CONNECTION, LINK. A CONNECTED GROUP OR SERIES.

For this column: Interconnected moments, actions, and attitudes in work with youth. Also the name of a fictitious agency with several programs for youth.

For this special issue, I was invited to submit a second Nexus column to describe my thinking about the future of child and youth care. I chose to share part of a monograph I am writing with seven youth workers. The monograph provides a foundation for a study we are conducting of their stories about moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment. These sections of the monograph define postmodernism and creative works, two concepts that help shape the way we think about these moments.

POSTMODERN YOUTH WORK

The Development of Postmodern Thinking in Youth Work

In defining postmodernism, Karen VanderVen (1999a) wrote:

> "....postmodernism emerged in the face of disillusionment with modernity which contends that there is a complete truth that can be sought by methodogically rational scientific inquiry....In postmodern thought, however, knowledge is considered to be socially constructed by individuals in their interactions with others, and is shaped by the context in which they live. Meaning is conferred to any situation by the perspectives people bring to it from their own subjective value systems (p. 294)."

Postmodern thinking in youth work developed over a period of years among several people (see for example, Fewster, 1999; Garfat, 1998; Krueger, 1998; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998) who had practiced and studied youth work and felt that a traditional scientific approach alone would not produce the knowledge that was essential to understanding and advancing youth work. Reducing youth, youth workers, and the outcomes of their interactions to measurable behaviors and attitudes

didn't "ring true" with their experience. They had experienced youth work as a complex process of interaction, where no two situations or people were the same. Each interaction, youth, and circumstance was unique.

Their primary goal was to understand rather than prove. They believed that to know and advance knowledge about youth work, one had to, as Jerome Beker (1996) said, "hear it deep and look to the underlying questions that will do so much to determine the soul of the field (p. 3)."

Stories and/or narrative accounts of practice helped them in their quest. These forms of understanding were consistent with the way youth work was experienced and talked about. In a good story or log note or case study, one could see, hear, and feel the contexts of daily events with youth.

Thus, they observed, listened to, experienced, told, and wrote the stories of youth work. They learned from history, youth workers, youth, and the work of sociologists, educators, anthropologists, and psychologists with similar views about understanding human nature.

They also tried to know and value their own life experiences so they could be open to understanding and valuing the unique experiences of youth. The attitude was: "because we are so unique there is so much more to learn from one another. Our stories have much to teach us so let's tell, listen to, learn from, and contribute to the development of these stories as we interact."

Like many philosophers and other students of human nature, they learned that every youth and worker lived in a unique reality that was shaped by his or her cultural and familial experiences. Activities such as playing baseball, moving from one activity to the next and having a meal had many meanings. A game of baseball or a transition, for instance, had a different meaning for each youth based on his or her prior cultural and familial experiences, just as each youth's developmental capacity to participate in these activities was different. Further, no two situations were the same. Where, with whom, and what was done influenced the outcome of an interaction. So did the tone, mood, and tempo of an event or moment.

My View

I think of postmodern youth work as a process of interaction in which workers and youth create moments that change their stories (Krueger, 1998). Workers and youth struggle, work together, fail, and succeed as they journey through adolescence together. The journey for youth is full of paradoxes and contradictions. For example, the desire to be free is compounded by a continued dependence on others; wonderful new sexual feelings confuse what it means to be close; dreams of the future are mixed with a longing for the past when things were simpler—these are views of a world, which is both more exciting and more confusing.

Youth ask, "Who am I? What will I become? How do I fit in this world of new, exciting and frightening possibilities in which I find myself? Am I acceptable to others? What makes me unique and how can I be me and still be like others? I am Don Quixote and Hamlet. At times I chase my dreams and at other times I am consumed by my thoughts about myself. Sometimes, I long to just be."

These paradoxes and conflicts are compounded for young people who have been abused and/or neglected. Their stories are often full of violence, alienation, drug abuse, and failure.

As workers share the journey through adolescence, they use their knowledge, self-awareness, and skills to develop relationships and to promote the development of youth. Their primary goal is to be there and understand. The message they convey with actions and words is, "I am here for you. I want to know who you are. I am curious about your story and how you feel."

With a sense of understanding, they create moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment. These moments, one can argue, provide the substance in adolescent development. Youth develop, in other words, when they experience a sufficient number of moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment.

A moment of connection occurs when workers and youth are "in the moment" *with* one another, acting, interacting, and/or just being. There is a sense that they are together in the moment. A moment of discovery occurs when youth have an "ah ha" experience. They say and/or think, "I see. I got it now. I figured it out." A moment of empowerment occurs when youth are ready to try or do something: "I think I can do it. I feel ready to try. I am motivated to change or grow."

Creative Works

One way to think of these moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment is as creative works (Bruner 1996, pp. 22-23). Workers and youth, in other words, use several technical and creative processes to create works (moments of connection, discovery, and empowerment) as they interact. With their actions, thoughts and interactions, they sculpt and shape these moments.

Briefly, to exemplify, let's imagine that you are a youth worker in the Nexus group home, one of many programs in the fictitious agency I use to guide my thinking for this column. You begin by planning a day or shift in advance so that the opportunities to create works are increased. In a traditional youth work sense you plan activities that are geared to the developmental readiness and capacity of the youth to participate.

You improvise like a modern dancer or jazz musician improvises. You play off the youth and the music, letting your senses, instincts, and intuition guide you. You are "in the moment," breathing, hearing, seeing, sensing your proximity to the youth, and communicating with your body. You use these skills to be open to and play off the movements of the

youth. You raise or lower your voice, walk slow or fast, shift position, sit, and stand. You also change the beat. The story of a shift or moment changes direction with a new activity or shift in tempo and mood. Sometimes your improvisations are slightly off. Despite your best effort you are out of sync with the youth. So you try again, learning from your experience.

You respond to and shape the multiple contexts within which your interactions with youth take place (Krueger & Stuart, 1999). You are curious about the different meanings that youth and you make of an interaction or activity. The meaning of a meal or bedtime or walk in the park, for instance, is different for each participant. You ask, "What's it like for you?"

You are conscious of the atmosphere in which an interaction or activity occurs—the tone, mood, space, light, sound, and smell around you. The dining room might be noisy or quiet and the play area too small or the right size for the number of participants. You dim the lights, lower your voice, and so forth.

You think about the nature of what you are doing. If the task is too difficult or not challenging enough, the context is different than when the task is challenging but not overly taxing. The nature of the activity is different when it's a shared activity than when it isn't a shared activity. You finger paint with a group of youth instead of using brushes and have each youth do an individual painting as opposed to a mural because this activity is more consistent with the youths' developmental capacities and readiness to participate at the moment.

Your goal throughout is to create as many works as possible. You are in the world with youth in a way that allows these moments to emerge from your actions and interactions. You create moments when you are connected. We are here, you and I, together in the moment. I can feel your presence with me as we walk together or do a chore or eat a meal.

Together you discover new insights about yourselves and the world around you. Your days are filled with "ah ha" experiences. Youth say, "I got it. I see what you mean. I figured it out with you. Now I understand how I feel." A youth realizes that he is angry and that there is another way to express his anger. Another youth figures out how to put a decal on a model car he's making. Popcorn is made for the first time by another youth.

Finally, you create opportunities for empowerment. Youth feel and or say, "I can do it. I feel good about myself. I want to try again because I am confident that I make it." A youth gets back on a bicycle and maintains his balance. Another youth expresses a feeling of anger for the first time. Three youth put up a tent for the first time on a camping trip.

These moments occur in multiple situations and contexts. Following are four specific examples of how you might improvise and respond to contexts to create a moment of connection, discovery and/or empowerment:

You approach a youth on a street corner. You are aware of your feelings—perhaps anxiety and apprehension. You hear and see what's going on. You position yourself a few feet from the youth, say hello. Normally you would look in someone else's eyes to show a sense of respect and care, but on the street in this neighborhood it is a sign of disrespect or "dissing" to look in someone's eyes. So you are cautious about how long you maintain eye contact with the youth as you try to make a connection. You are aware of how your presence and body language influence the situation. Your affect shows that you are trying to create a friendly atmosphere for being with the youth. Together, these actions and attitudes create the work of connecting with a youth on a street corner.

A Native American youth comes from a tribe where he has been taught not to disclose his feelings in public or with people outside the family. Thus, you engage the youth in art projects and activities such as running so he can express himself in other ways. During these activities, you are present, trying to be in sync with the youth's rhythms for trusting and growing and aware of how the environment is influencing your interactions. Together you discover how your stories influence the way you experience interactions.

With sensitivity to the meaning and rituals of meals, you plan a diverse menu and decorate the dining room with colors and pictures that express the diversity of the group. You learn with and from youth about mealtime in different cultures as you try to create a new culture for eating together. The meals are planned and paced with sensitivity to rituals, traditions, and rhythms of the participants. You eat together with a sense of fulfillment, connection, discovery, and mutual empowerment. The sense is that because we eat together, and learn about each other, we feel even more motivated to grow.

Bedtime for one youth means he will have to put his head on his pillow and be alone with his thoughts of failure, rejection, and abuse. He was abused in the middle of the night and awakened by fights and the sounds of violence on the streets. Thus, you provide a safe atmosphere for sleep that is filled with human rhythms of quiet talk and presence. And the youth feels care that contributes to his positive sense of self and desire to grow.

Summary

Youth work is a process of daily interaction. Youth develop as they interact with youth workers. Each moment has potential for connection, discovery, and empowerment. To enhance the possibility that these moments will occur, youth workers interact with sensitivity to context and improvise as they share the journey through adolescence.

Postmodern thinking and creative works are two concepts that I find helpful in understanding this perspective of youth work. I can see youth work as a complex process of interaction among unique individuals who explore the possibilities for effective practice. In the future I believe concepts, metaphors, and analogies such as the ones just presented will provide a deeper understanding of our work.

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