IMPROVING COHORT FUNCTIONING: ARTS-BASED METHODS AS DATA COLLECTION AND INTERVENTION IN A HIGHER EDUCATION ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Cohorts are student groups who begin and complete a course of study together over time. Though cohorts have been linked to positive outcomes, researchers note that many students report negative experiences, including scapegoating, irreconcilable conflicts, and strained relationships resulting in unlearning. This paper describes using arts-based research (ABR) within an action research framework to illuminate toxic dynamics over four cohorts. Findings suggest that ABR illuminated these negative patterns, permitting students to honestly engage in critically reflective conversations. These conversations then afforded an opportunity for them to intervene into their cohort's harmful dynamics in order to move towards healthier learning relationships.

KEY WORDS: Action research; Arts-based research methods; Cohorts; Critical reflection; Higher education; Systematic intervention; Toxic dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Cohorts are groups of students who begin and complete a course of study together over a specified period, remaining intact, and proceeding together through a series of courses and developmental experiences. The cohort model can be understood as evolving patterns of relationships amongst people and allows for diverse groups of students from a variety of backgrounds to interact, network and exchange learning experiences on a consistent basis (Maher, 2005). A foundational premise for this format is that cognition is an active adaptation embedded in social relationships, i.e., learners are active agents in constructing knowledge in relation to other active agents. This makes cognition a *whole person* activity (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). Learning goes beyond the mere acquisition of facts; it includes emotional involvement, behavioral skills, social and cultural competencies, and spiritual

actualization (Jerbi et al., 2015). When applied to cohorts whose learning goals involve intervention for social and organizational change, learning also encompasses comprehending and intervening effectively in the social and emotional processes associated with the cohort itself.

Learning methodologies customarily used in the cohort model tend to favour active and collaborative ones, which consolidate the links between experience, theory, and praxis (Barnett & Muse, 1993). Therefore, learning is seen as rooted in sustained, enduring relationships. "Without emotional attachment to significant others, learning would be difficult if not impossible" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 151). Students embody knowledge and skills across the curriculum, developing a sense of shared history that can be referenced in future learning situations. Generally, cohort members are also given the opportunity to actively shape their own learning community, transforming the classroom experience into significant, deep learning. Simultaneously, they integrate conceptual, social, and emotional precepts concerning the self and others in relational spaces, i.e., the spaces where learning and transformation occur (Wertsch, 1985). Because of a strong trend of positive student outcomes, the use of cohorts as a template for future professional experiences is widespread (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Raelin, 2007; Thompson et al., 2020).

The strong trends in the literature that illustrate positive outcomes create an instructional and unquestioned conviction that cohorts are good learning experiences. However, cohorts are not without their significant problems. Researchers have noted that students frequently report negativity between students or between students and faculty (Barnett et al., 2000); that they or their classmates were excluded, "boxed into" predictive and constricting roles, trapped in disagreeable relationships, or scapegoated (Teitel, 1997); or that students experienced intense discomfort and irreconcilable conflict early in the life of the cohort (Maher, 2005). As well, Lei et al. (2011) reported additional drawbacks such as cliques, some students stunting the growth of knowledge, competition instead of collaboration, and dynamics that resemble dysfunctional families. So, while the findings of some studies are positive, others suggest that cohorts may be prone to serious interpersonal difficulties that can significantly compromise learning.

THIS INQUIRY PROCESS
Context
The graduate program in this inquiry is designed to provide expertise for work as organizational consultants or community leaders interested in facilitating change processes within systems. It is a non-residential program, meeting face-to-face monthly for an intensive 3-day learning experience. Its instructional approach embodies a socio-ecological perspective, and a distinguishing feature of this program is the use of the cohort model. Cohorts consist of, on average, 20 students who represent various and diverse racial and ethnic origins, gender expressions, and ages, and last for two years- the span of the program. Students are given the opportunity to fashion a learning community with common concerns who collaboratively and interdependently engage in the co-construction of knowledge. However, some of the pitfalls associated with cohorts sometimes appear, and toxic dynamics become present.

Purpose

Action research (AR) "nearly always starts with a question of the kind, 'how can we improve this situation?'" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 11). The purpose of this inquiry was to reveal and illuminate any toxic, harmful, or limiting cohort learning and relationship dynamics. An additional, and more vital, purpose was to give students the opportunity to intervene into their own processes, and shift dynamics towards healthier and more effective ones.

Methodology

As a professor in this program, I am concerned with creating a climate conducive to whole person learning that promotes transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Emotions are deeply involved in transformative learning, since students are invited to explore their implicit assumptions and alternative ways of being-in-the-world (Dirkx, 2006). "These processes can be accompanied by various emotions, such as guilt, fear, shame, a sense of loss, or general anxiety" (p. 19). These emotions can then give rise to difficult dynamics in the cohort system. I wanted to reveal and illuminate unproductive and constraining cohort dynamics by exploring the experiences of the student participants through their own voices. For that reason, I used a qualitative approach (Bhattacharya, 2017). I also wanted to afford them an opportunity to intervene into these dynamics. Therefore, I situated this qualitative inquiry within an AR framework, since it inherently creates a space for intervention, and a space for change. This design has the added benefit of fulfilling a keystone objective of using a cohort model – creating a space that permits cohort members to comprehend and intervene effectively into their own social-emotional processes.

Specifically, the AR model I relied on was described by Stringer (2014), who outlined fundamental commonalities across all traditions of AR:

1. **Look**: This is a phase of gathering data and building a picture, i.e., to define and describe the essential issue that is specific to the cohort in question. This phase would allow the cohort members to understand the experiences of each individual and gain clarity and insight about the dynamics based on cohort data and place it in the larger cohort system.
2. **Think**: This phase involves exploring and analyzing what is present in the data. It involves interpreting and positing possible explanations for how and why things are the way they are, i.e., theorizing. This phase would encourage cohort members to engage in *collaborative* meaning making and be able to interrogate the data *together*, forging a co-created awareness of any toxic and hindering forces at play fixing it at the cohort system.
3. **Act**: This is the phase that focuses on planning and implementing practical solutions to the problems that were the focus of the inquiry, and is designed to generate a localized, life-enhancing solution. This phase would create for the cohort an open space of emergent possibilities which would permit the cohort system to reconfigure itself into healthier and more effective patterns of learning and relating (Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010). By doing this collectively through conversation, it would frame the intervention as a dialogic whole system one (Bushe & Marshak,

2014), since toxic dynamics are supported by systemic forces, not just by individuals.[1]

However, I faced a major constraint because cohorts only met once a month, but I wanted this collective dialogical meaning making and intervention to have some immediacy (i.e., exploring and making sense of the data, and planning the intervention immediately after the phase of data collection). Therefore, I decided to use arts-based research (ABR) to generate and represent the cohort data.

Why Use ABR?
ABR is:

> the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (McNiff, 2008, p. 29)

This methodology includes research that advances knowledge and communicates research understandings. At its heart is the assumption that knowledge is rooted in experience and requires a form for its representation (Eisner, 1988), one that addresses its nuance, evokes empathic feelings, and brings a fresh perspective so that old habits of mind do not dominate reactions (Eisner, 2008). ABR offers opportunities to stretch capacities for knowing, creating a synthesis of approaches to collect, analyze, and represent data.

ABR has many advantages as a methodology (Leavy, 2018). It is particularly useful for inquiries that describe, explore, discover, or attend to process, while offering a range of insights across a variety of issues and contexts. It is holistic, capturing a fuller texture and deeper complexity of lived experiences while considering issues expansively. For inquiries that focus on systems, it can be particularly useful in forging micro-macro connections between systems and the larger context, revealing the fractal relationship between small and large (brown, 2017). As well, ABR is both evocative and provocative, accessing emotions, desires, and passions, and communicating these in powerful and inspiring ways while simultaneously being understandable and accessible. And in the context of AR, it challenges dominant ideologies, includes traditionally marginalized or historically minoritized voices and perspectives, democratizes meaning making by releasing a multiplicity of understandings, and is participatory.

As well, the principle of *do no harm* which characterizes AR (Williamson & Prosser, 2002) was a primary consideration. At this point of the term, relationships in the cohort tended to

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[1] It is important to note that a fundamental assumption underlying this inquiry is general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972). This perspective, borrowed from biology, views collections of people as a living system, an organism that coordinates its parts and processes, engages in interchanges with the environment, and is oriented towards growth. Therefore, decontextualized individuals do not exist but are rather a patterning of peoples' interactions with each other (Stacey, 2003). Intervention, then, attends to disrupting these patterns and changing them.

be frayed and strained because of clashing perspectives, priorities, work styles, and values, ineffective or toxic patterns of interaction, or fears about judgment and exclusion. Exacerbating these tensions would compromise students' standing within the cohort and their individual learning. ABR, in representing data in symbolic and imaginal forms, would enable student participants to create a space where emotionality could be expressed as a means of making sense of systemic dynamics, without shame and blame being targeted towards specific individuals. The imaginal provides a mythopoetic pedagogy that provides space for the expression of imaginative and affective voices and provides a helpful framework for constructively and creatively working with emotion-laden experiences (Dirkx & Espinoza, 2017). The ABR approach crafts the optimal amount of aesthetic distance (Bleuer at al., 2018) - a space between an overly emotional state regarding any toxic dynamics and an overly rational state of typical research objectivity.

Participants
Over the course of five years, data were collected from four different cohorts who had worked together for several months. Seventy-three graduate students participated in an AR session using ABR methods, which occurred towards the end of their first year in the program.

The Process and Methods
Various forms of artmaking were implemented as part of the ABR process. The methods always included at least one of the following from each group: *poetic* (poetry), *visual* (collage or mask making) and *performative* (clowning or puppetry). The number of groups was dependent upon the number of participants in the cohort. Participants were able to choose which group they wanted to join, and there were never fewer than 4 participants exploring a particular modality. Each group had their own private space in which to work, and all materials were provided.

Participants engaged in conversation in their groups both before and after using their chosen ABR method. Each group had an experienced facilitator who was a graduate of the program. The sole exception was the clowning group. This group was led by an outside consultant familiar with the art form. The facilitator guided the dialogue, answered questions about the materials or method, and recorded these conversations. As well, participants were asked to share their thoughts about the artifact that they had created.

During each iteration of this inquiry, all groups were asked to:
- describe the learning and relational patterns within the cohort and
- identify any fears, challenges, undiscussables, toxic patterns, covert processes (Marshak, 2006), and the *shadow* side of experiential learning (strong emotions that are difficult to feel and accept and are often avoided or ignored) (Clancy & Vince, 2019).

Specific reflective questions were tailored to the strengths and resonances for that art method. For example, questions posed to the clowning or puppetry groups built on the historical traditions of these forms in satirically critiquing systems, and elicited data about

any dynamics that were particularly difficult to express- the *undiscussable* and shadow dynamics operating within the cohort. Questions proposed to the poetry groups centered on any challenges or fears. Questions put to the visual methods groups focused on two different dimensions:

- Mask making was concerned with the cohort's façade and any toxic patterns.
- Collaging attempted to identify any overt and covert detrimental dynamics that shaped cohort relationships.

Photographs were taken of the artmaking activity and the artifacts.
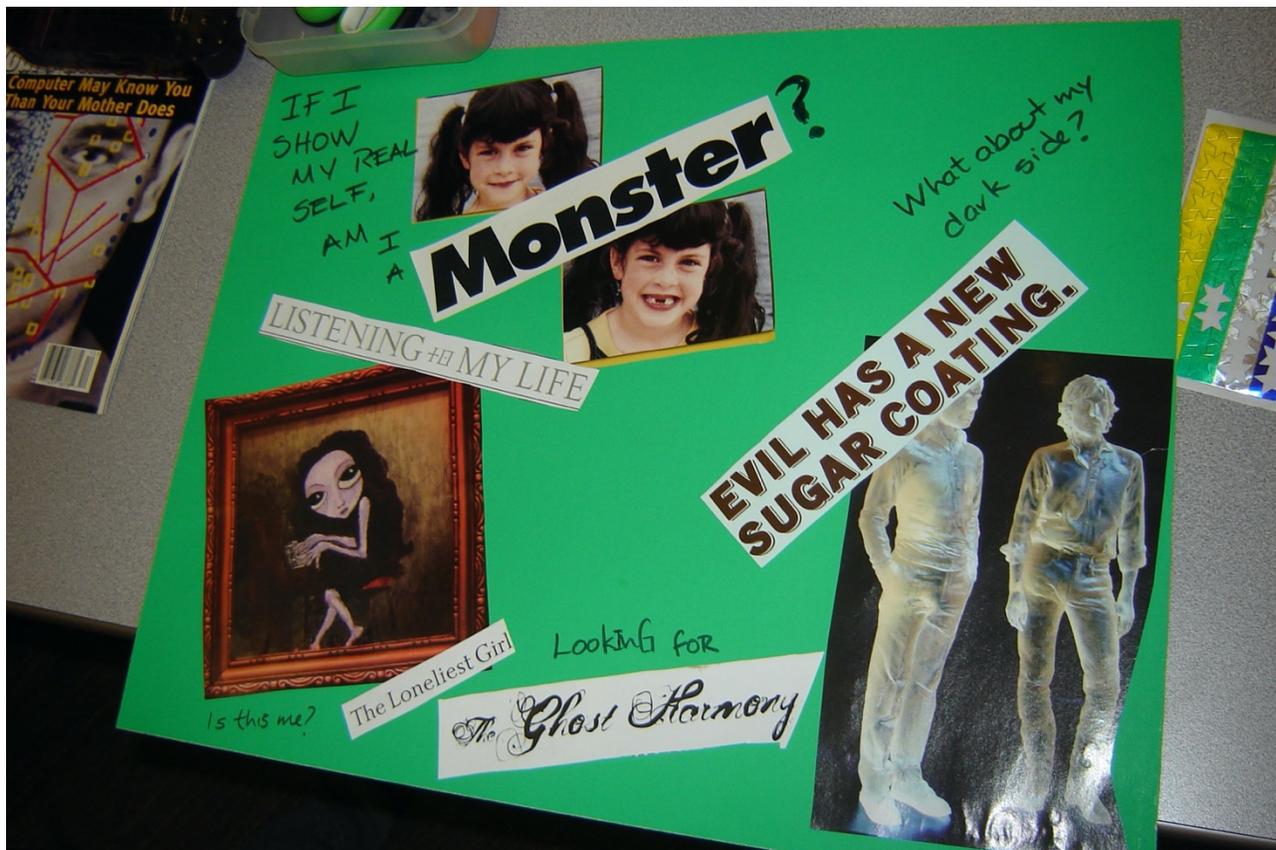
Figure 1. *Collage: Am I a Monster?*
(Note: This collage illustrates some of the fears about judgment and rejection that characterized one cohort.)

A key feature of this inquiry was a vernissage for the cohort of all the created art works. This occurred immediately after the post-artmaking conversations. Members of the cohort were assembled in community, all artifacts were displayed, and the performative pieces were showcased. Participants were then encouraged to walk around and examine the art pieces. After a period of reflection, cohort members were invited to engage in a collective sensemaking session which included answering questions about the pieces, and sharing the thoughts, feelings, and reactions the artifacts sparked. This dialogue then progressed to theorizing about the harmful systemic forces operating within the cohort, and then to

interventions about deconstructing and transforming these forces into healthier, more effective ones. During these phases I took ethnographic notes – "open jottings" (Emerson et al., 2011) – which encompassed both descriptive and reflective notes regarding interactions, insights, and clarity that were shared during these post-vernissage conversations, expressions of emotion, power quotes (Pratt, 2008), and possible interventions, while attempting to maintain a chronology.

ANALYSIS
The pre and post group conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed. Transcripts were read line-by-line a minimum of three times. Using an open coding procedure (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), units of meaning were grouped together conceptually to create a list of emergent codes. Axial coding was then performed wherein the emergent codes were examined, then classified for similarity in meaning, and later used to create higher order codes and eventually categories. Codes were then analyzed across cohorts and artmaking methods using the constant comparative method (Dye et al., 2000), and an inductive data coding process was used for categorizing and comparing qualitative data for analysis purposes. Ethnographic notes were also subjected to the same analytic processes.

OUTCOMES
Since the questions that were posed to the groups focused on fears, challenges, undiscussables, toxic patterns, covert processes, and the shadow side of the cohort, the data that were generated overwhelmingly contained themes about these undercurrents. However, rather than seeing this as a skewing of the data, it is important to remember that surfacing these complicated and destructive dynamics, and the structures and patterns they generate, is key to addressing them. Ignored, they serve to "work to ruin the very institutional policies meant to contain them" (Britzman, 1999, p. 322). Excessive emotion, unexpressed reactions and feelings, and unproductive and hostile patterns that are not named can harm thinking, learning, and relating processes (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). Therefore, it is essential for educators to integrate and work with these emotions and processes. This can only be done by subjecting them to the "same kinds of critical scrutiny we might expect of other forms of reasoning" (Plumb, 2014, p. 157).

Outcomes suggest that these methods were able to reveal to participants the toxic and negative patterns within the cohorts and created opportunities for them to begin to shift their own dynamics towards healthier and more effective learning relationships. The themes reported below were present across all cohort groups.

The Look Phase: Revealing Any Toxic Patterns
This phase was achieved in two parts: the first was the post-artmaking conversation, and the second was the presentation of the artifacts and the subsequent questions during the vernissage.

"Who's Pulling the Strings": Struggles with Authority, Dependence, and Power
At some point in the life of every group or system, the issue of power, influence, and authority must be resolved. When referencing authority in this context, participants generally signified faculty. They talked about times when cohort members and the emotional environment shifted when faculty entered the room. One member of a collage group reflected, "I feel like a puppet, just going along for the ride. Who's pulling the strings? The easy answer would be faculty, but I'm not sure that's true." These negative dynamics were typically activated by evaluation processes, i.e., grades, that are core to higher education. "How I am I supposed to be comfortable just being or saying what's on my mind when faculty are evaluating it?" (Collage group). Though behavior or participation was never graded to encourage an atmosphere of experimentation and risk-taking, these mental models of judgment still prevailed.

Affiliated with the pre-occupation with faculty's assessment of their capacities and performances, was a reliance on external forces to direct, contain, lead, decide, and take responsibility for actions within the cohort. Dependency tends to undermine students as active constructors of knowledge and builders of their environment. "So, one of the things that comes to my mind is there's a dependency on the structure to [regulate] us" (Clowning group). There was also a reluctance to name dependency dynamics. "If there's dependence, no one's going to speak up to it because they're afraid they may be the only one who's standing there alone" (Puppetry group).

Concerns about power differences were also present and usually perceived by the participants as those individuals who had more, versus less, influence. This tended to be focused on those who spoke easily in the cohort and seemed to have more than their fair share of influence in decision-making. "There is a lot of perception about who holds the power in the cohort. And this inhibits us" (Poetry group). These struggles directly undermined cohort ability to engage in learning through co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008). This practice is a form of AR in which all participants work together in an inquiry group as co-researchers and as co-subjects. According to Heron and Reason, everyone is engaged in the experience, the design, and implementation. Everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions. Therefore, everyone involved can take initiative and exert influence on the process.

"I'd Rather Step Aside": Avoidance
Another harmful pattern identified was the use of avoidance – avoidance of disagreement, of expressing divergent opinions, and of naming destructive dynamics. A participant in the mask making group noted, "When I think of us at the beginning, when we were very conflicted, I think of a tornado, right? I'm not going to put myself in the path of a tornado, so I'll step to the side." Avoidance was seen as the reason for the excessive and rigid politeness that characterized many cohorts. "It's a bit like walking on eggshells…We don't want to have these difficult conversations with each other because we feel like we need to be really, really nice to everyone" (Clowning group). Avoidance also fueled a cohort's inability to address issues or problematic practices. "We don't talk. If there is a problem, we pretend it's gone after one day. It's like, 'Oh, it doesn't matter.' No, it matters" (Poetry group).

As mentioned above, spaces of transformative learning can be places filled with tension and anxiety. As a defense against anxiety, students often have an overriding impulse to avoid strong emotions and mask difficult feelings (Clancy & Vince, 2019). Nonetheless, in many ways, this is specifically the point of the cohort model which creates spaces to intervene in systemic social and emotional processes. "Students are invited to 'feel' individually and collectively so that they can better understand how organizations are emotional places, not taught how individuals within organizations can 'manage' emotion" (p. 181).

"They Only Wanted to See One Part of Me": Confined to Restricting Roles

Like the research reported above about stereotyping in cohorts, there was an apprehension about roles that had been conferred upon cohort members. Sometimes the roles were scapegoating, i.e., placing responsibility on an individual for what was problematic about the cohort. "I took on a bunch of sh*t that wasn't mine, and then it was excruciating" (Clowning group). Sometimes the roles revolved around a cohort member's strength. In both cases, these roles were constraining and limiting, and served to hamper the learning and growth of the individual student:

> I've been crowned the theory queen, and this bothers me. I kept telling people, "Stop calling me that." I've been pigeonholed. So, in every single [group assignment] that we have, I had to do the analytical part, all the theory, and nobody challenged me. Nobody. And I missed all the learning. (Poetry group)

At times, constricting roles are the result of stereotyping, a common practice of simplifying and reducing others for one's own purposes (Kahn, 2008), usually to manage anxiety. Within this context, these limiting roles inhibited learning. They indicated a maladaptive way of dealing with the tension and ambiguity that is a result of learning shock (Griffiths et al., 2005), experiences of frustration, confusion and anxiety experienced by students who find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by disorienting cues.

"Playing That We are Okay": Fears, Conflict, and the Risk of Being Vulnerable

There were a wide range of fears expressed and represented in the artifacts created with the ABR process. Some were fears about rejection, isolation, exclusion, and hurting people's feelings, which stemmed from worries about their own status within the cohort. A loss of status might result in a "loss of the community of care that we've created" (Collage group). Other fears centered on the fear of being wrong or of being judged. "My fear is that I come across inappropriate or harsh" (Poetry group). Regardless of the specific fear, the result was to create a dampening of vitality and spontaneity within the cohort. "So, it's like there's just something that is sort of in the air that is nebulous" (Clowning group). Fearfulness also resulted in students not exploring their potential and expanding their capacities. "We're always conscious about the other and not wanting to hurt the other and that sometimes means putting ourselves second, just by being so careful in the words that we choose" (Mask making group).

At the root of many of these fears was the pervasive apprehension about conflict and its repercussions within the cohort. Afterall, these students would be together for two years, proceeding through all their courses and experiences together. "If you disagree with me, that's fine. It's not personal. It doesn't mean we're fighting. It just means we've got different ideas. So, because people have this idea of fighting, everyone's kind of dancing around each other" (Clowning group). This intimates that many participants have a mental model that conflict is only a destructive force, and not a generative one (Kahane, 2009). In conflict-averse environments, even disagreements tend to be covered over rather than dealt with, since things might get personal (Vince, 2001).

Figure 2. *Clowning: Exploring the Many Faces of Destructive Conflict*
(Note: This photo collage illustrates the undiscussable forms of conflict that characterized one cohort. The clowning consultant is Morgan Nerenberg.)

Façades (i.e., maintaining an outward appearance to conceal one's true reactions and feelings) were seen as essentially a protective force against these fears:

> I have experienced the cohort in two different ways, as a true happy family and as a family that pretends to be happy. Sometimes I think that we put so much effort in trying to show that we are happy instead of analyzing and saying, "Today, we're not happy. Today, I have a personal conflict with you. Today, I don't feel that safe space that I felt the last weekend. So, maybe we can explore why is that." Instead, I believe we continue playing that we are okay. That we are a really cohesive cohort. (Mask making group)

Though façades may be seen as functional, in reality, they make it more difficult to form genuine relationships with others. The more authentic a person can be, the greater their ability to connect with other people, which enables them to have fuller and deeper relationships (Jourard, 1971). Students often reported that the cohort structure was what appealed to them upon entering the program because of the richness of the community learning experience. Yet, more often than not, cohorts adopted masks. The necessity for a façade indicates that participants may have held feelings that they were unworthy, incompetent, or unlovable. One member of the collage group observed, "I see also that in the cohort there is a lot of fear of perhaps not being good enough." The risks of being vulnerable are high, in that it reflects a societal mental model that vulnerability is weakness, with the potential of precipitating rejection or ridicule (Brown, 2013). A participant in a poetry session said that their poem wrestled with "the whole idea of being comfortable to be vulnerable."

Transition to the Next Phase
Translating the dynamics around these themes into a co-created understanding of the lived experiences of cohort members served to set up the next stage of the AR process. As one member of the clowning group observed during the vernissage, "In the most literal sense of the word, we are making a mockery of it [the fear of conflict], because at least in my opinion, it deserves to be mocked. Because if it's not, then it holds power over all of us." This prompted a shift into making sense of the data.

The Think Phase: Understanding the Patterns and Expressing a Need for a Shift
Action research is collaborative, and therefore engages with dialogue and difference, which is key to organizational learning (Vince, 2001) and developing a reflective praxis (Schön, 1984). The creation of the artifacts, the post-artmaking conversations, and the subsequent vernissage created a space for mediated dialogue (Palus & McGuire, 2015), a distinct form of AR group dialogue characterized by conversations in which a deeper level of meaning and shared understanding is intended. It balances advocacy of one's opinions (and inquiring into those opinions and their underlying assumptions) with building shared meaning. It supports AR by revealing hidden data (both objective facts and subjective beliefs) by creating, testing, and revising shared understandings about what the data signify. ABR methods are closely aligned with mediated dialogue. "We found that images of various kinds can enhance and focus ('mediate') otherwise difficult conversations" (Palus & McGuire, 2015, p. 693).

Though sometimes individuals may feel threatened and act defensively or skeptically during dialogue (Vince, 2001), this was not the case when engaging in sense making about what the artifacts suggested about the cohort's dynamics. At first, there was some hesitancy, but soon this was replaced by enthusiastic and vigorous interactions. This may be because the experience of observing the artifacts was safe, inviting, and often humorous, lowering interpersonal defenses. Emotions and attributions were projected onto the art pieces rather than onto each other (Palus & McGuire, 2015). Power dynamics did not seem to come into play, since the cohorts shared a mental model that the interpretation of art was idiosyncratic and valid; no one had more authority than any other.

Yet there was still an anchoring in and a resonance with the cohorts' lived experience. Perhaps it is because "Art [is] the attempt to wrest coherence and meaning out of more reality than we ordinarily try to deal with (Vaill, 1989 as cited in Palus & McGuire, 2015, p. 698). This promoted a facing of multiple issues that had dogged cohorts for months.

1. Participants were able to see patterns. "This avoidance- this flight- is preventing us from getting stuff done" (Ethnographic notes).
2. This dialogue encouraged a more systemic, and responsible, outlook. "I think that we, all in our separate ways and differently, are playing into this" (Ethnographic notes). This type of insight typically generated agreement across cohorts.
3. Cohort members were able to adjust their perspectives to more accurate ones. "I mean we can have a conflict and it's not the end of the world" (Ethnographic notes).
4. Cohort members began to question their previous understandings about individuals within the cohort and the roots of their difficulties. "We see caring and confronting as opposites. Do we have that capacity to move out of that caring zone and into a place that really merges the two?" (Ethnographic notes).
5. Mediated dialogue helped cohort members to unhook themselves from the past and focus on the present. "I'm experiencing a little bit of a paradigm shift of my view of the cohort in that they're more where this is now rather than then" (Ethnographic notes).
6. There was a transformation in a sense of their own agency. "At some point we realized, 'Wait a second. This is our program. This is our experience. We can create it how we want'" (Ethnographic notes). The dawning of this type of realization was generally followed by a burst of creative energy.
7. In asserting their own agency, students were able to plant seeds of hope and optimism. "So, I think there's been a shift and I'm looking forward to seeing what changes can occur now" (Ethnographic notes).
8. There was also a richer quality to their dialogue. "I think there is a transformative quality to this process. I mean for me it's not like conversations we've had in the past" (Ethnographic notes).

Metaphors are a way to understand new concepts by comparing them to familiar ones. They are devices of imaginal knowing (Heron & Reason, 2008). Lakoff and Johnson (2003) contend that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but also in thought and action. The use of ABR methods encouraged cohort members to use metaphors to communicate their growing understanding of more systemic forces: changing the wheel of the bus while it is still moving; a river whose source is mountainous and rocky but transforms into a smooth flowing current; a mosaic; and the interdependent gears of a car. One particularly poignant one was, "I'm metaphorical sometimes, so the first one that came to my mind was us being roses. Roses are really beautiful flowers, but they also hurt" (Ethnographic notes).

Perhaps one of the most powerful impacts of using ABR during this phase was to produce a perceptual shift, in that cohort members were able to collectively move from a *blaming-the-individual* stance (scapegoating) to being able to visualize the toxic repetitive patterns within the cohort. "Looking at [the artifacts], I realize that there is a lot represented unconsciously.

We explored the individual level, but the loop has come back to the group" (Ethnographic notes).

Another participant remarked, "This [vernissage] showed me things that were already there, but I didn't see before" (Ethnographic notes). Envisioning whole system dynamics is "concerned with a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future" (Senge, 1990, p. 69). This alteration in their point of view was fundamental to their process of becoming active agents who have the capacity to intervene into their own system. During the post-vernissage dialogue, cohort members described substantial insights regarding the detrimental patterns and underlying dynamics. These led to meaningful shifts in members' understanding of their history and current processes. "I think because of our overwhelming attachment to one another, we're not as good at dealing with conflict as we need to be" (Ethnographic notes). Insights welcomed both agreement as well as divergent opinions.

Any AR process which is attempting to create change will need to "Look for energy in the system-- narratives which excite or anger people. These are the points at which there is an emotional energy which holds the possibility for change" (Burns, 2015, p. 443). Fears about judgement, rejection, and the risks associated with being authentic were very alive. But using the ABR methods suddenly unlocked the energy consumed by them, along with the energy necessary for hiding difficult unacknowledged emotions (Coghlan & Shani, 2015), forming a space where new opportunities could emerge. "This just really felt like a heartfelt conversation with each other at a cohort level" (Ethnographic notes). Engaging in artmaking and sense making about the significance of the data did not make the hard feelings vanish. Cohort members expressed how "there's so much going on, it's really messy" (Ethnographic notes). However, the ABR methods helped them to reflect and allowed them to clearly articulate their feelings.

Cohort members were able to connect experiential knowing (knowledge generated from direct experience in relation to one's lifeworld) with propositional knowing (knowing about something in intellectual terms of ideas and theories) through presentational knowing (an intuitive grasp of patterns and wholes through images, stories, and the arts) (Heron & Reason, 2008). "Okay, I'm going to be a big nerd and cite theory, but I think our cohort is moving into a phase of interdependence" (Ethnographic notes).

This thinking phase, i.e., co-creating a shared understanding of systemic patterns, was greatly facilitated by using the imaginal method. This is a process of imaginative engagement in which learners embrace and enter into dialogue with emotion-laden images and experiences. This method urged participants to engage in a dialogical relationship with the artifacts created using ABR and then with each other. This fostered creative insights into the

Figure 3. *Mask Making: We Have Shiny Teeth*
(Note: This mask illustrates the *true* face of one cohort- one that was more critical and judgmental than participants wanted to admit.)

meaning of affect and emotion in their cohort lives and cultivated multi-subjectivity (Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010) and greater self-understanding (Dirkx & Espinoza, 2017). This process nurtured presentational knowing, the most basic way of making sense of our experience. Holding open the presentational and imaginal space to create a shared understanding of patterns permitted dialogue "to do its sense-making magic, allowing our stories to resonate with those of other group members" (Heron & Reason, 2008, p. 372).

The Act Phase: Dialogue as Intervention
Intervention is "purposeful action by an agent to create change" (Midgley, 2015, p. 157). In the field of systems intervention, there has been a shift from a diagnostic focus to a more dialogical one (Marshak, 2013), i.e., facilitating exchanges amongst stakeholders who bring different insights to bear on complex issues. In this way, dialogue also functions as a methodology of interactive planning that seeks to liberate the knowledge and creative abilities of everyone involved to produce a plan for an ideal future that each system can work toward (Midgley, 2015).

Though presented as distinct phases, in situ there was a cycling back and forth between the Think Phase and Act Phase of this inquiry. This recurring pattern mimicked the general systems theory property of interactive complexity, when cause and effect become interchangeable (Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010; von Bertalanffy, 1972). Insights about the underlying meaning of the data elicited thoughts about possible interventions; these possible interventions would then spark more profound reflections and theorizing, which, in turn, prompted richer possibilities for intervention. Dialoguing about their fears about being vulnerable stimulated thoughts about what needed to happen. "So, I really see how authenticity plays a really crucial role within the group but am I living it in the actual moment" (Ethnographic notes). In confronting their conflict-aversive environment, they became inspired on how to change their behavior to break repetitive patterns. "I'm hoping that as a group we can learn to become fearless freaks and be able to go out there and do bold moves and be honest" (Ethnographic notes).

The shift in the conversation towards interventions was largely sparked by hopeful messages. "I think there are threads coming through. Like the thread of humor, fun, compassion, shared pain, or shared joy. I think that's what's keeping our mosaic together" (Ethnographic notes). Revisiting these insights and re-enacting this form of dialogue in the future demonstrated shared commitment to attend to these dynamics. "I think that having more opportunities like this to build our relationships and to build trust would be really great for the cohort" (Ethnographic notes).

The creative and non-verbal approaches contained within the ABR methods harnessed cohort energy and commitment which were imprisoned by the toxic patterns. Using these approaches, viewing them in the vernissage, and co-creating meaning about these artifacts permitted the participants to integrate their rational and intuitive minds (Mackewn, 2008). Intuition and rationality are two fundamentally different languages of thought, but at the same time both are needed for effective strategic decision making (Calabretta et al., 2017), i.e., choosing the best path for cohort success. This melding of the two into a paradoxical

tension sanctioned abandoning either/or thinking to embrace both/and possibilities, while simultaneously learning to work through these tensions.
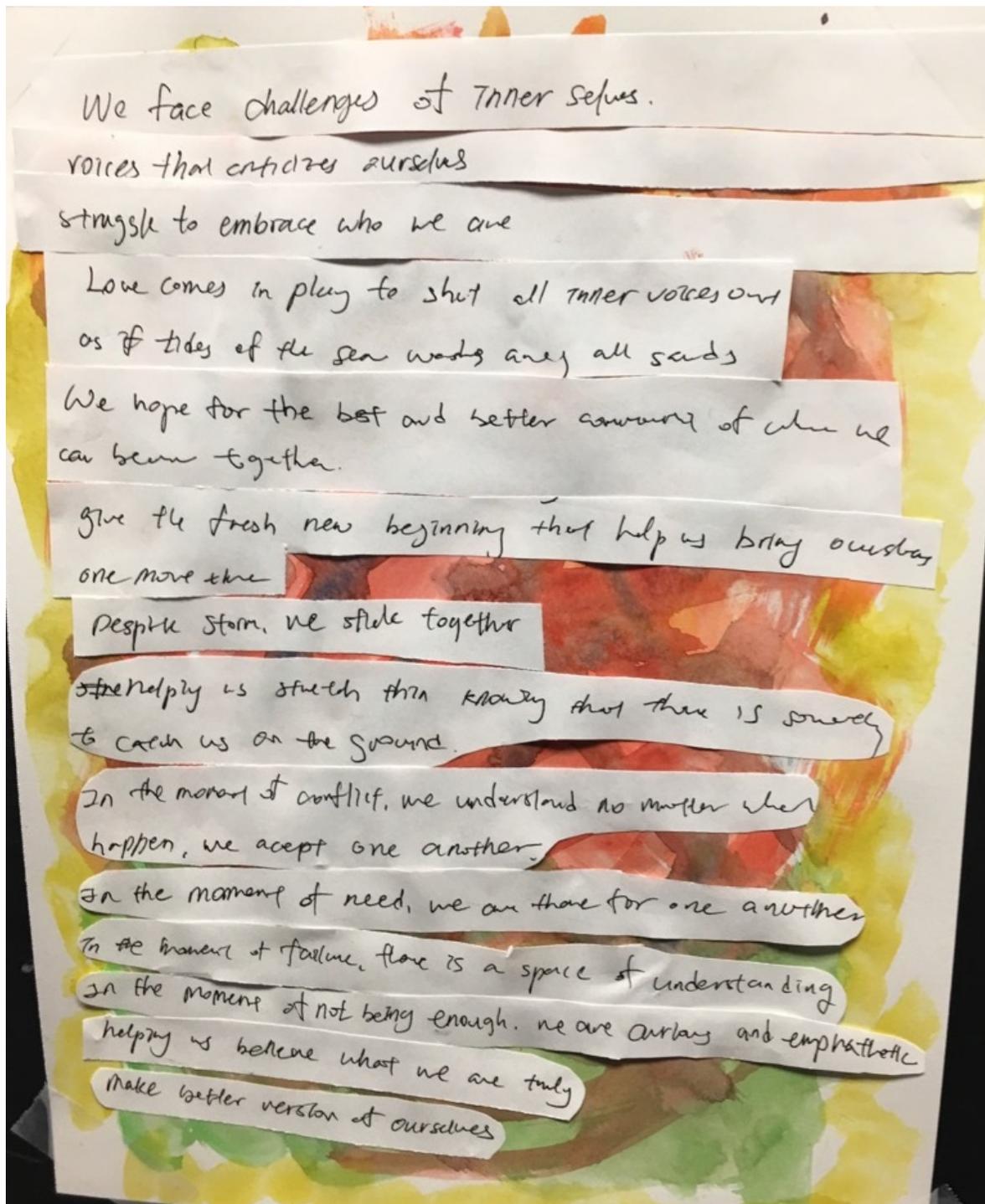

Figure 4. *Poetry: Despite the Storm*
(Note: This poetic collage illustrates the struggle to be authentic in the face of challenging dynamics that characterized one cohort.)

POSTSCRIPT

As students entered year two of the program, they would often reference their ABR session when discussing cohort dynamics. The experience became a kind of shorthand for communicating the need to re-engage in conversations that would work towards them actively intervening into, and reshaping their own processes. This experience was not a magic wand that made the difficult aspects of the cohort disappear, but it did set the stage for a way for the cohort to engage in dialogue about them.

CONCLUSION

This inquiry illustrates the importance of facing the difficult and harmful dynamics and non-learning (Jarvis, 1987) that beleaguer some cohorts. ABR methods can function as a method for collecting data about these dynamics, but also affords a critical reflective space that invites cohort members to intervene in their own learning processes and relationships. ABR is particularly effective in exploring marginalized, controversial, and disruptive perspectives (Estrella & Forinash, 2007) that can illustrate some of the sources of the dysfunction.

In this inquiry, artmaking and dialogue gave student cohort members the tools to reveal the complexity of their experiences and honestly explore the depth of their multi-layered relationship undercurrents (Samaras, 2010). ABR was a permissive and nonthreatening alternate mode of expression that facilitated self-disclosure (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014) which generated individual and shared meaning. By democratizing meaning making ABR insured individuals each had a voice that was not drowned out by more dominating ones.

As well, using ABR allowed them to engage in critical reflection about their own behavior in promoting the shadow side of cohort learning and expand their reflective capacity, generating insights that became shared knowledge as a basis for future action. Reflective practice is a core competence for practitioners (Cheung-Judge, 2020). As one cohort member mused, "How are you going to help them [systems] through change if we can't help ourselves through change?" ◪

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