

Reclaiming Voice in Therapy and Education

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Abstract

In this paper, we engage Simon (2024) and Abraham (2024) to consider how therapeutic and educational practices are shaped by assumptions about knowledge, authority, and meaning-making. Their work led us to question not only dominant professional language, but also our own desire for certainty as trainees. We describe the Heartstory Collective, a creative, student-led initiative using story, music, movement, art, and theatre to foster relational and embodied learning. Through this experience, we explore both the possibilities and limitations of decentralising expertise within a university. We conclude with concrete commitments for carrying shared, local, and lived knowledge into our future practice.

Reclaiming voice in therapy and education

In engaging with Simon (2024), we began to question what we take for granted in our training as systemic practitioners. Simon shows that therapeutic theories are not neutral descriptions of people; they carry ideological assumptions about what a problem is, where it is located, what counts as a healthy self, and how change should happen. This challenged us to consider how easily professional language can turn a person's experience into evidence for a theory. When such assumptions remain unexamined, they can individualise suffering, pathologise communities, and elevate the norms of those who already hold institutional authority.

We also found ourselves complicating Simon's invitation. We cannot simply step outside theory. As trainees, we need theories to organise our learning, communicate with supervisors, and work responsibly. The tension, then, is not between using theory and rejecting it. It is between holding theory as a provisional resource and allowing it to become the final authority on another person's life. Simon's paper has made us more attentive to the moment when a formulation stops opening conversation and begins closing it. It has also made us ask whose values are being protected when a particular account of the self is treated as professionally correct.

Abraham's (2024) heart-centred approach to education offered a related challenge. Her use of poetry responds to educational environments organised around evaluation, certainty, and correct performance. We were drawn to the possibility that learners' own words, emotions, and hopes could become part of knowledge-making rather than distractions from it. Poetry, in this sense, does more than make learning creative. It changes who is permitted to contribute and what forms a contribution may take.

At the same time, our experience led us to elaborate on Abraham's invitation. Creative practice is not automatically liberating. A poem, movement exercise, or personal story can become another performance if students feel they must reveal themselves correctly, appear emotionally insightful, or satisfy an educator's expectations. For creative learning to decentralise authority, there must also be room to hesitate, decline, remain uncertain, and respond differently from others. We began to understand heart-centred education not as a particular activity, but as an ongoing negotiation of consent, risk, authorship, and responsibility.

Taken together, Simon and Abraham shifted how we understand language in therapy and education. In both settings, specialised language can position people as passive recipients of someone else's account of reality. Yet we also recognise that shared authority does not mean pretending that differences in role and power disappear. Educators still assess students, and therapists still hold professional responsibilities. Our question has become how these roles might be practised transparently, without treating institutional authority as the only legitimate source of knowledge.

The Heartstory Collective grew from conversations with Abraham and took shape in our cohort as a student-led initiative in 2026. Its public description locates storytelling and creative engagement within a wider effort to build relational learning (Abraham, 2025). In our sessions, students brought story, music, movement, art, theatre, and embodied practices into a university environment usually organised around lectures, assignments, and assessment. What began as a response to the readings became a practice through which we could notice how knowledge felt when it was created collectively rather than delivered to us.

In one session, Sydney explored how we relate to love and hope during times when they feel distant. Through storytelling, group yoga, and shared music, we sat together with love, longing, and uncertainty. These themes are often subordinated in professional training to productivity, performance, and mastery. The session did not give us a single definition of love or a technique for producing hope. Instead, it created a shared experience in which different responses could remain alongside one another. Sydney came to understand embodiment and sound not as additions to learning, but as ways knowledge is formed between people.

In another session, Shuning noticed that, although each person entered with different struggles, themes of connection, trust, love, and hope began to move across the group. This challenged the isolation that can accompany training, especially when students privately worry that uncertainty signals incompetence. Hearing others speak did not erase individual differences, but it changed the meaning of those differences. Shuning began to see that becoming a practitioner might involve learning how to stay with uncertainty collectively, rather than proving that she can resolve it alone.

Marian's understanding of community knowledge grew from experiences beyond the classroom. After her father's death, she navigated welfare and government systems while experiencing housing instability. Much of what helped her survive was learned through trial and error and through

conversations with other women in a shelter. They shared practical knowledge about resources, systems, and ways of finding support when formal processes felt overwhelming. This knowledge did not come with professional credentials, yet it was immediate, contextual, and necessary. Marian's experience extends the readings by showing that community knowledge is not merely an inclusive supplement to institutional expertise; it can be the knowledge on which survival depends.

These experiences have changed what decolonising practice means to us. We no longer understand it only as inviting more voices into an existing structure. An invitation can leave the structure itself unchanged, including who sets the terms, who evaluates participation, and whose language remains most credible. Heartstory allowed us to experiment with a different arrangement, but it also revealed its limits. The Collective still took place within a university, with unequal roles, deadlines, and expectations surrounding it. We could decentralise authority for a time, but we could not claim to have removed the institution's power.

This tension follows us into therapy. Diagnosis, documentation, and measurable outcomes may be required within healthcare and insurance systems. We do not want to ignore those responsibilities or romanticise personal experience as beyond question. We do want to notice when a psychiatric label becomes louder than the person speaking, when a case conceptualisation makes context disappear, or when our need to sound competent narrows what can be heard. Simon and Abraham have helped us move away from asking for the correct professional explanation and towards asking what a particular language makes possible, what it obscures, who recognises themselves in it, and who must translate themselves to be understood.

We are still at the beginning of our training, and we do not know how fully we will be able to preserve these ways of learning within professional systems. What Heartstory has given us is not a new clinical technique. It has given us a memory of sitting together while a story, a movement, or a piece of music carried meaning that none of us could have produced alone. We want to carry that memory into our classrooms, role-plays, supervision, and future therapeutic conversations. For us, reclaiming voice begins in the small pause before we name another person's experience: a pause in which we listen for the knowledge already present and consider whether our words will make more room for it.

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Marian Little is a doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Therapy programme at Alliant University in San Diego. Drawing from her lived experiences and passion for community wellness, she is interested in the relationship between nutrition, mental health, and family connection. She hopes to develop non-profit and community-based programmes that help families build stronger relationships through cooking, shared meals, and nutrition education. Her work is guided by a commitment to relational, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive approaches that promote emotional and physical well-being.

Citation

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