From Vision to Voice: Rural Helping as Listening to the Tales that Teach

Abstract

People who work in small communities as professional “helpers” (e.g., teachers, nurses, social workers, ministers) are often trained in urban centres with primarily urban views of the world assumed. In the SSHRC-funded research reported on in this session, we conducted interviews with over 40 such helpers in a range of small New Brunswick towns and villages, listening to their stories of the challenges such work presents. Drawing on what they have shared with us, we are currently designing curricula that aim to better prepare helpers in various professions to work effectively in rural areas, where the narrative complexity of everyday life is especially apparent. This can make issues such as confidentiality, personal and disciplinary boundaries, and professional ethics uniquely problematic. Given such issues, the curricula we envision equips people to listen for stories that teach: their own stories as persons and professionals; the stories of those whom they serve; and the local-to-global stories by which their communities are impacted and in which they are embedded. In respectfully and reflectively listening for multiple stories at once, “helping” becomes transformed from a process of “experts” responding to those “in need” to one of mutual listening and learning.

Listening to the Stories That Teach: An Introduction

This paper outlines a research study that we are currently conducting on the nature of rural helping in general and, in particular, on the kinds of curricula that will prepare students in various helping professions to practice in small communities. Our guiding conviction is that such curricula need to incorporate a narrative perspective. By “a narrative perspective” we mean a perspective which assumes that human beings are fundamentally storytelling creatures, that stories
are the lifeblood of rural settings, and that learning these stories is essential to effective helping within them.

The impetus for this study has been our experience that people who work in small communities as professional helpers, e.g. teachers, nurses, social workers, ministers, are often trained in urban centres with primarily urban views of the world assumed. Our own practice as rural helpers ourselves – a nurse, a social worker, and a minister of religion – has shown us the limitations of current perspectives on helping, particularly helping in rural and small town settings. In our SSHRC-funded research, we have conducted interviews with over 40 people who “help” in rural communities in New Brunswick, a primarily rural province. These helpers include professionals as well as volunteers and community developers. We asked them to share stories with us of experiences that have highlighted the skills, knowledge, and qualities that they have found necessary to help effectively. They also told us how they learned what they needed to know to work in a rural environment. Our own experiences, as well as our participants’ stories, have thrown light for us on many of the challenges of working in rural communities, among which are dealing with stress and burnout, accessing suitable support and resources, coping with multiple roles, and developing a balance between personal and professional life. In this paper we will reflect on key themes that have come through these stories and taught us what a narrative curriculum for rural helping could entail.

In employing a narrative perspective, we have come to the realization that our own stories themselves, derived from living and working in various rural communities, have issued in the models of rural helping that each of us has implicitly constructed. During the first stage of our research, therefore, we explored with one another our own models of rural helping. We then interviewed New Brunswickers who have been employed in rural communities as professional helpers, or who serve as volunteers, unpaid helpers, or community leaders. Participants included representatives of our own professions, plus teachers, police officers, medical doctors, daycare workers, politicians, and more – individuals with experience in a wide range of small communities, whether aboriginal or non-aboriginal, and different aspects of the New Brunswick economy oriented around fishing, farming or forestry.
Drawing upon our interview data, we are currently designing curricula that we hope will better prepare helpers in a number of professions to work effectively in rural areas. Based on our analysis of this data, as well as our reflections on our own experiences, what has emerged for us is that a principal component of the curricula we envision is, in short, learning to listen for the stories that teach: for example, their own stories as persons and professionals; the stories of those whom they serve; and the local-to-global stories by which their communities are impacted and in which they are embedded. Rural social work researcher, Brian Cheers (2004), supports such a perspective by saying that a rural community is “a community where narratives meet” (p. 14). In respectfully and reflectively listening for multiple stories at once, helping thus becomes transformed from a process of “experts” responding to those “in need” to a process of reciprocity through mutual listening and learning. By engaging with community members, that is, professionals can begin to relinquish their “expert helper” identity, an identity that requires directing processes and making decisions. It requires a shift from doing to listening, from teaching to learning, from self as expert to other as expert-partner, from a sense of solo practitioner to one of good neighbour. To use the words of David Brandon, (1982) “helping is like selling water by the river” and drawing upon the rich range “of personalities, skills, knowledge and experiences”. This is particularly the case within rural communities where the skills and resources of community members themselves are so accessible. In a similar vein, one of our participants described what she learned as akin to Aboriginal spirituality in which “we are all related” and responsible for the well-being of the community as a whole.

**Stories about Effective Rural Helping**

From our research we learned that professional helping differs from helping done by people in the local community. This difference led us to question the very term helping itself with its connotation of “doing onto others”. We found that paternalism existed in professional rural helping models and assumed “beneficence” on the part of the scholar-practitioner and a problem on the part of the healthcare recipient” (Cody, 2003, p. 289). Our participants, like ourselves, considered professional helping curricula to be urban-bound as they recalled dilemmas that these teachings created for their work in rural settings. They told
us that different professions held different definitions and models of “helping”, and that in small communities these definitions often clashed. Police officers, for example, endeavoured to “serve and protect” the public with an authority-based model, while some social workers had a mandate to protect vulnerable populations with a provincial policy-based model. Some of these models are derived from overall differences in professional values and ethics. For example, nurses may focus on an ethic of caring for all, whereas some social workers may espouse an ethic of social justice. All too often ethical codes act as barriers to working from the community’s needs and its internal stories. Organizations employing helpers in rural communities also held different positions on the act of helping itself. In instances such as child abuse, social control seems to be an integral part of helping, while in counselling situations, social control and helping are diametrically opposed. In addition helpers themselves come from different value bases. One minister may see his work as a “calling” which requires an open-door policy, yet another may keep rigidly to a “day off” and insist that parishioners seeking counselling make appointments in advance. On the other hand, a community leader may consider helping activities simply to be part and parcel of their lives as members of the community. For one such participant, an Aboriginal social worker, her role was to keep a “healing watch” on her community.

Life in rural communities, we learned from our participants, is often shaped by historical relations with other communities, or by the seasons with farming and fishing, for example. In addition, government decisions regarding, for example, health care delivery, child protection, or access to resources, often do not reflect people’s needs. Instead, they end up creating further problems: problems that bureaucrats may in fact discount because of the urban lens through which they are looking. In other words, policies, though well-intended, sometimes adversely impact rural people’s lives, obvious examples being policies associated with the Indian Act and with legislation controlling farming, fishing, and lumbering practices. One of our Acadian participants identified how policies for Acadian citizens often kept them in poverty and illiteracy, which fostered continuous dependency on social welfare support, rather than providing them with means to better their lives through their own efforts and choices. Another participant, involved with immigrant populations in a rural setting identified that,
Under Canadian Immigration policies, only immigrants can benefit from English or French second language training. So we decided that those who were Canadian but didn’t speak English and those who were on work permits could also take part... So it’s now very inclusive.

These citizens found ways for all those in their community who needed language training to access it and increase their chances of getting employment. They were more inclusive than the federal policies toward international immigrants to Canada.

Changes in the broader, international scene – vis-à-vis global markets, multinational corporations, free trade agreements – can profoundly affect rural communities in ways that are often not assessed or addressed. For example, in Nackawic, New Brunswick, the economy was based primarily on the lumber industry. When the local mill, owned by a US citizen, was shut down, the village drastically changed, because of ensuing lay offs, loss of pensions, and the closure of local stores and banks. Hopeful options concerning new jobs or plant openings failed to materialize. When the foreign markets for New Brunswick’s potato crop closed down, rural farmers chose to donate their crops to food banks and international aid programs, rather than see them wasted.

Our participants taught us that professional, personal and practical education for rural helping requires developing a model that moves beyond the term “helping” itself. The foundational principles of such a model would be that it: is based on community stories; uses communities themselves as places of learning; focuses more on practice leading to theory rather than the other way around; and examines everyday experiences from the needs of the people themselves. It would also acknowledge differences, recognize common issues, and examine the impact of both upon helpers and communities alike. The power and place of stories, rituals, metaphors, and relationships within communities would be honoured as well, given the impact that they have on everyday life and for the hidden or silent ways in which they shape decisions and directions.

Effective helping in rural communities, our participants identified, is based on reciprocity and attending to the community’s needs, as perceived by community members themselves. Our interviewees thought that a theory-practice
relationship arising from theories about helping did not capture the unique complexities within their small community. Experiences in rural settings had led these professional helpers to understand the need to draw on practice as the basis of theory, rather than vice versa. In trying to suspend previous knowledge bases from urban curricula, they faced personal dilemmas such as negotiating a boundary between personal and professional life. Rural helpers, particularly rural helpers who live in the community where they work, cannot easily construct a boundary. One participant told us that she was asked for counselling when she was still wearing her nightclothes, another thought it was necessary to spend leisure time in another community. Indeed, our research has led us to question the whole distinction between “personal” and “professional”.

Our participants found that accessing the diverse stories of rural communities assisted them to work effectively. Rural practice in the helping professions seemed to call for flexibility, openness to possibilities, understanding of local history and story, listening rather than directing, an understanding of the sense of “home” or “place” to those living there, and experiencing the community on its own terms. Upon reflection, we wondered how much of this was also true for urban practice, and what did this mean for professional curricula as a whole. Is a curriculum revolution required?

A new approach to helping – suspending our paternalistic notions of intervention and our need to control decisions that do not require our control – would allow for those whose lives are most directly affected to contribute to the process (Friedman, 1990). Although situations of public safety and protection may require professional intervention, such situations could be examined to determine if some degree of choice is possible.

A democratic type of curriculum may be in order – a more dialogical one where learning from narratives, questioning values, and learning qualities such as working with uncertainty have equal significance with learning the professional skills required for practice. In this discovery approach to learning from experiences and stories, knowledge and meaning unfold in discussion and those involved can come to a common understanding. Conversations in which significant problems are addressed can push ideas forward so that the expertise of many emerge and can be valued. In preparing students for such open-ended
narrative practice, we, as professional educators, can engage with our students in examining key helping values, qualities and skills useful in rural practice. As role models, educators can show new practitioners ways to be effective in rural settings and guide them to trust their own and others’ expertise. Narrative inquiry into our own professional images and metaphors of power, paternalism, caring and authority can reveal for us the barriers we create in rural practice. This new approach leads us to ask new and different questions. For example, do we carry with us in our academic language, a sense of power over situations? Do we have attitudes that stigmatize or aggrandize rural as “the sticks” or as “idyllic havens for respite”? One participant said that in a small setting, where things appeared friendly, she encountered hidden stories that she described as “two solitudes” – Francophone and Anglophone. This led her to question whether other solitudes, based on religion, ethnicity or class exist.

How do we help students find the wonder of learning within rural settings without the use of “magic cloaks” from paternalistic socialization imbedded in professional agencies or hierarchical institutions of power? How can they learn to be with people, to reach out, to open up and trust themselves in uncertain situations to what a community needs? The answers to these questions require an understanding of our own world views along with the strengths and limitations of this new metaphor of helping. Then we can open up to learning what the rural community’s world view might be through its metaphors.

O’Connor (2003) argues for a “humble approach” (p. 188) where we suspend our “oughts” and “shoulds” and entertain a degree of uncertainty until the community comes to define what it wants. Restorying, she says, is recommended in order to shift from an “either–or” version of the situation to a “both–and” working through a community story in a more cooperative manner. A professional needs to enter into the storied world of the community. In this way, the professional becomes a guide, a keeper of the community’s story, a friend or fellow citizen accompanying the other on their journey in their own “home” territory.

Respecting the community as expert in their own lives allows for the unexpected to happen. People teach themselves within their own place, time, and story. For example, one rural participant worked to bring two rival communities together
for local athletic and social events to bridge the distance between them. Focussing on such events shifts the attention from a curriculum based on skills and content to one centered on learning values and developing qualities of personhood. The other is no longer a stranger but a neighbour, a person for whom we do neighbourly things. One of our participants talked about the differences he saw between old village council meetings and current ones. Today’s representatives, he noted, go by urban models of political posturing, while previous sessions involved community members gathering around a table to discuss a problem and identify who in the community was the best person to deal with it. They didn’t necessarily look for the one with the most education but, in his words,

We looked around at our community and asked who could help…. We have people here to help, and when the resource is on our doorstep, we tend to use it. It is sort of a door-to-door approach versus an urban model of leaving home to find it elsewhere…. When the community needs things done, or they need someone to help, we try to be there, to find the tools, simple tools, accessible tools, so they can do it by themselves.

By not expecting ourselves to be accountable for changes and honouring the strengths of a community to be accountable for itself, we, as rural professional helpers, may be able to avoid being all things to all people, burning-out, or feeling conflicted by our professional codes.

Oddly enough, the participants who lived within communities and helped out because of their internal understanding of local needs did not experience the issues that professional helpers encountered. This raises a question about “helping from within” and what that means. Is effective helping by professionals and non-professionals rooted in an ethic of community care or good citizenship? Do our students need to learn what being a good citizen in each rural community entails? Citizenship involves working with others. In our colleague Tom Bateman’s terms, citizenship is defined as “engagement” and “participation” (2007, personal communication). Cheers (2004), however, takes us further by actually challenging our professional identities.
We are not the center of the social care universe, we are not the sun holding the system together with our magnetic appeal and political indispensability…social care is an expression of human society – of all the relationships and interactions amongst people groups and organizations… It is also an ongoing expression of interaction between people responding to each other subjectively, intuitively, and spontaneously from the narratives they live (p. 10).

How, then, do we provide curriculum that will facilitate this learning? How do citizens engage and how do they participate? How do we get beyond the stories and become part of the fabric of the community and thus become someone who works from within? How do we reach a position where the rural community becomes the place where community members and professionals meet? These crucial questions need to be explored in our curricula for rural helping.

Narrative Curricula for Effective Rural Helping

Old curriculum models, including behavioural and outcome-based models require proving competency and expertise in helping others by “doing onto”. According to our participants, these models have not assisted them in rural settings. Models that help teachers and students to become guides, accompanists, and mentors rather than experts and fixers seem to have more potential for helping in rural practice.

Shifting from old curriculum notions embedded in our psyches and professional practices can be difficult. When stressed we may revert to old ways. Learning narrative reflection as an on-going practice or autobiographical inquiry as a first-line of examination in stressful situations may provide professional helpers with a backup protection against burnout. Education of this kind sensitizes students to “story”, to the narrative nature of rural life, to their autobiographies, and to the narrative stories embedded in rural communities. It begins with them and helps them unpack some of the barriers that silently impede their success as rural practitioners. Brandon argues that we need to know ourselves first and identify the biases, fears, and tensions that live within us before we can venture to professionally guide others.
A recurrent theme was that much of the learning about helping in rural communities must take place within the communities themselves. It is outside of the university that students will learn to relinquish the academic myths and assumptions about rural helping that we may have unknowingly perpetuated and, instead, to listen non-judgmentally to the stories recounted by community members themselves that reveal insights into the community over time. Understanding how a community has maintained its continuity through difficult times can help us guide them in future difficult situations. This would lead to a reversal of the current thinking that the academy should be the primary place of learning, and would challenge those who educate helpers to find ways of rooting the curriculum in the everyday life experiences in the community. In listening to the told and untold stories, students can reflect on their implications. McKenna (1997) states: “the shortest distance between human beings and The Truth is a story” (p. 134). In hearing the meaning of community narratives, students can gently become a part of the fabric of the community and someone who works from within.

This conclusion leads us to agree with Cheers (2004) that we need to shift from a therapeutic mindset of client-clinician to community member. Such a shift would require a rethinking of our practices and a re-conceptualizing of a number of constructs such as social justice, community, caring, dependence, as well as need (White, cited in Cody, 2003). Our definition of these constructs will be different in each unique rural community. This calls for curriculum exercises that guide students to work with uncertainty rather than predictability. It requires educators to navigate through uncertainty and help students develop a sense of flexibility.

New professional helpers – including those who have had little experience of rural helping, those who have some understanding about rural issues, and those who are insiders to a particular community – need to explore their knowledge (or relative lack of it) as outsiders to a particular rural community, and need to find ways of gaining credibility amongst the rural experts. Those who had little knowledge about rural issues may make inaccurate assumptions. As one participant told us, several novice helpers entered the community with “citified ways” about appropriate professional boundaries or about standards of cleanliness in the kitchens of working farms. Unlearning as well as learning was
important for the students with limited experience of rural Canada. The students with little knowledge about rural communities will need help in acquainting themselves with issues that are important to rural people – including issues of poverty, depopulation, or living in the workplace if the workplace happens to be a family farm. Those who have some understanding about rural life, but not of the particular community where they will practice, need to explore how they can use this knowledge in the new setting. One participant told us that she looked around the homes of her clients and took cues from what she saw. For example, the simple phrase “bear-meat tastes good” enabled her to establish rapport with a hunter who had a bear head on his wall. Another visited his clients with his work boots on, ready to talk with the farmer while he was loading hay. For all newcomers to a community, learning the local stories helps bridge the distance from outsider to insider. Helpers who are insiders, such as an Aboriginal social worker who returned to his home community as a professional helper, had a different challenge. He wanted community members to acknowledge that he might have learned something of value to them during his professional education.

An issue mentioned by several participants was the challenge of developing ethical practice in an environment where the professional Code of Ethics had a poor fit with the reality of rural life and rural helping. For example, one social worker asked, “How do you maintain confidentiality when everyone knows the social worker’s car?” Even if she parked a distance from the clients’ homes, she would probably be seen entering the home, causing the neighbours to talk. It is advisable for students to explore ethical challenges and consider how to resolve them before encountering them in actual practice.

As we reflected on these issues, our view that autobiographical work is an important component of the curriculum was affirmed. Students, we believe, benefit from considering their own lived experiences of rural communities in order to decide what they need to learn and unlearn and how they might position themselves as professional helpers. This autobiographical work can guide them in reflecting on the skills and qualities needed to be good citizens in the communities in which they work. There are a number of ways that this education might occur. Students may work closely with experienced practitioners (local or professional) who will mentor them as they relate their own stories to the individual, family and community stories in the rural settings.
where they work. Indeed, many of our participants felt that students in professional programs needed to work in the field with local experts to learn ways of accessing rural stories and their meanings. Also, university teachers might assist students to explore their own notions of rural practice and the implications these notions bring. Students may also benefit from explorations with their peers about the experiences and challenges they encounter in their practice. These discussions will feel more authentic if they take place in the rural community rather than in the “ivory tower”. After the students have explored their own stories and the web of stories within a community, the professional literature can be examined and its benefits and limitations for rural practice discussed and evaluated. When professional knowledge does not fit the reality of rural life, rural helpers need to develop new theories and methods of practice that are rooted in community stories.

References


