

# **The Vulnerable Learner: Moving from Middle to Margin in Dietetic Education**

*Jacqui Gingras, PhD, RD*

## **1. Abstract**

*Dietetic education, the baccalaureate process of preparing students for professional roles as dietitians, has maintained a rather conservative view of knowledge for its entire existence (over 100 years). Contemporary social problems such as food insecurity, violence against women, homelessness, and child poverty have immediate intersections with nutrition through reduced access to an adequate supply of safe food. I speculate here what might be made possible when dietetic educators consider transdisciplinary knowledges such as feminist science be embraced to disrupt century-old approaches to teaching and learning. Such a transdisciplinary gesture seems important for the dietetic profession, even though such a move might make vulnerable the dietetic educator as learner when knowledges move from the middle to the margin.*

## **2. The Vulnerable Learner: Moving from Middle to Margin in Dietetic Education**

At a recent Ryerson-McGraw Hill Learning and Teaching conference, I attended the keynote address by Dr. Tony Chambers, Associate Vice-Provost (Students) at University of Toronto, who shared with us his reflections on the question: "What is the purpose for learning?" He persuasively offered to us that the purpose for learning was for healing and transformation. During the question period, an audience member offered, "Healing and transformation are worthy purposes for learning, I suppose, but what about learning for the thrill of intellectual pursuit? Why not learn for the sake of simply acquiring knowledge?" Chambers paused, hand to his chin, reflected, and then responded decidedly, "It is not enough. Knowing what we know of the world's troubles, to seek knowledge and do nothing with it is not enough." My memory of his response has lingered with me as I reflect on the purpose for learning as a place for healing and transformation. In this paper, I reflect what healing and transformation might be made possible with a dietetic education that attempts a transdisciplinary move in order to address complex social issues such as food insecurity, violence against women, homelessness, and child poverty. These issues have immediate intersections with nutrition through reduced access by marginalized individuals to an adequate and dignified supply of safe, healthy food. To achieve an understanding of how science is informed by social life, one typically explores the sociology of science, the foundations of scientific thinking and feminist science (Harding, 1991), and what Kuhn calls the "essential tension" between a scientific problem to be solved and the crises this problem represents in the social world where the problem is situated (Kuhn, 1977; Kuhn, 1970). One might also explore how power works to enable the purpose of learning to be healing and transformative.

In dietetic education, curriculum tends to be silent on issues of power. Power, the capacity to produce change, acts through us all in a myriad of ways, but we don't

typically speak directly about power, or more specifically, we don't speak of "power-over."<sup>1</sup> When power is used to diminish, exclude, or silence, it is worthy of analysis, critique, and response. Unfortunately, in dietetic education, critical analysis is reserved for tests of scientific objectivity. Rarely does critical analysis refer to a critique of science knowledge as grounded in particular historical and social situations, where power is organized hierarchically (by class, race, or gender), and where each person can achieve only a partial view of reality from his or her position in that social hierarchy (Harding, 1991). What if the dietetic curriculum that exists in sixteen programs across Canada included feminist theory in the curriculum as a response to power-over and the ethical dilemmas that result from oppressive situations? What might become possible with such a shift in teaching and learning? What currently prevents these programs from engaging with feminist theory, inviting dialogues on power, gender, race, and class as they inform nutrition and food issues such as fatness, diabetes, and other illness experiences? What about our collective professional hush regarding food insecurity, violence against women, homelessness, and child poverty? These social problems have direct relations with people's ability to access a safe supply of nutritious food. What could be made possible for renegotiating what counts as dietetic knowledge and its relationship to the social world?

One such reason for these omissions is that dietitians (those teaching in dietetic undergraduate programs) are generally required to have "terminal" degrees in nutritional science, which privileges empirical, objective, and value-neutral Truth claims (Liquori, 2001), which may be responsible for reproducing nutrition inequities (Travers, 1995). Dietitians are typically positioned (by regulatory bodies and professional associations) as "the trusted expert on nutrition issues" (Dietitians of Canada, 1997). Dietitians categorize those who "seek" their services as "patients or clients."<sup>2</sup> These individuals' needs are seen as dependencies, not strengths. The authority dietitians enjoy comes from power-over, thus expressions of wonder and vulnerability are actively discouraged. Dietitians place an emphasis on fixing problems, not fostering relationships. Bella and colleagues (in press) have found that "dietitians appear to share a belief, even a professional ideology, that if information drawn from their domain of expertise is presented in the context of scientific 'proof,' their 'clients,' whether individual patients or members of the public, will comply with prescribed diets and correct their 'bad' eating habits." All of these attributes conspire to increase the possibility of Othering<sup>3</sup> in dietetic practice. Harm has been done to the Other in the name of dietetic education and thus, to dietetic educators through our reliance and unquestioning acceptance of these professional attributes. In the end, these qualities constitute a dietitian performativity, and dietetic education, while not considered solely responsible

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<sup>1</sup> Power-over is used here to denote the use of personal or institutional power to gain control or dominance over another person or group. This process could also be understood along lines of social exclusion such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, sizeism, or ageism.

<sup>2</sup> The terms "patients and clients" denote a reliance on medicalized and commodified views of the Other. These terms go largely unchallenged in dietetic discourse.

<sup>3</sup> The Other is a person different than the self. Othering is a mode of exclusion where the Other is devalued in some way for being different. In social science, the Other is often seen as requisite in coming to know the self.

for generating these attributes, might operate to sustain or amplify their effects (Gingras, 2006). Even though dietetic curricular theory has persisted in the tradition of positivism<sup>4</sup> for over a century, "it is possible to teach [dietetic] students [in a way] that doesn't require them to assume a fixed, singular, unified position within power and social relations" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 9). With careful attention to a socially-integrative feminist science, students, educators, and the profession might observe a most remarkable shift in dietetic education, which has significant implications for student engagement, dietetic epistemology, and practice.

In a course I created and taught for the first time this term called "The Art of Storytelling: Advances in Nutrition Counselling Practice," I asked dietetic students to reflect on this question: "*What kind of education is required to support students in becoming dietitians with imagination and courage, dietitians who are embracing change in themselves and others?*" The students wrote of their desire to learn about ethics and diversity, healthism, and relational cultural approaches to counselling. They wondered why this wasn't part of their learning to date. They shared their misgivings for the kind of work life they would encounter upon completing their degrees and competing for limited internship positions. They were surprised not to have learned of medical hierarchies, horizontal violence, and the gendered nature of dietetic knowledge creation and translation (men typically generate nutrition knowledge, while women enact it in practice (Liquori, 2001)). They even ventured to offer that storytelling (writing personal narratives) might be something that should be required for every dietetic student to enhance their interpersonal counselling practice. Of course, I couldn't have agreed more!

By orienting this course autoethnographically, my goals were to enliven dietetic practice for students; invite them to imagine what practice will be like; grapple with some of the complexities of practice in a supportive, creative environment; and think critically about practice as socially, relationally, and culturally situated. Also, I wanted to acknowledge the student's contribution to learning, exploring how the process of storying or narrative may strengthen reflexivity in our professional practice since to know of the Other is to learn of the self. The autoethnographic stories that the senior undergraduates wrote for this course were rife with imagery of confusion, disillusionment, and yearning. They often wrote of characters (dietetic students) engaged in real-life struggles to learn how to respond to life's challenges. The act of writing was even described by some as transformative; they came to understand themselves more clearly within the dietetic educational culture. Their writing then became a way of knowing: an indispensable ethical resource.

I encouraged the students to experiment with autoethnographic fiction as a means to strengthen their narrative structure. When I consider the constituting force of language, of the writer's powerful ability to wield language in a manner that constructs a

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<sup>4</sup> Positivism is a philosophical movement that holds that all meaningful statements are conclusively verifiable observation and experiment and that metaphysical theories are therefore strictly meaningless. Positivism is a philosophical orientation that considers theoretical knowledge as value-free, objective, and unrelated to practice. The positivistic tradition is historically associated with scientific processes and technical rationality (Vaines, 1997).

particular view of reality, I can acknowledge that all research texts are fictions or what Strathern (1987) identifies as "persuasive fictions" (p. 251). Admitting scholarly work to be persuasive fiction "forces a recognition of the rhetorical features in any piece of scholarly writing" (Sparkes, 1995, p. 160). Fiction brings forth recognition and in doing so might be considered pedagogical. Coles (1989) remarks that one keeps learning by teaching fiction since reader responses have their own "startling, suggestive power" (p. xix). Reader response enables a fictive text its pedagogical power in that upon reading these students' autoethnographic stories, I am bound to learn and keep learning.

In a recent article on storytelling in dietetic education, Lordly (2007) suggests that students value storytelling, seeing it as an enhancement to traditional teaching methodology, and wish that more professors would use storytelling. What I found most exciting was that students came to know storytelling as having an influence on moral reasoning and critical thinking. "Students who report that stories cause them to question and reconsider their current opinions may become critical practitioners who realize that multiple perspectives exist and must be considered. As educators, we can recognize the foster this type of critical inquiry" (p. 34). Storytelling and autoethnographic fiction writing is one means for not only bringing healing and transformation to the pedagogical encounter, but of addressing issues that have remained unexamined in dietetics education and practice. There is a profound possibility in this context for learning that is critically and socially conscious and speaks truth to power. Given the dearth of such opportunities in dietetic education, this will likely be a place of vulnerability for most learners, but what a disruptive and potentially transformative vulnerability it could be.

#### ***Authors' contact Information***

Dr. Jacqui Gingras, PhD, RD, Assistant Professor, School of Nutrition,  
Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Ontario , M5B 2K3  
Office: KHS 349-E, Tel: 416-979-5000 ext. 7890, Fax: 416-979-5204  
[jgingras@ryerson.ca](mailto:jgingras@ryerson.ca), [www.ryerson.ca/~jgingras](http://www.ryerson.ca/~jgingras)

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