

## **Intersubjective Knowing: An Innovative Model in Graduate Level Course Design**

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### **Abstract:**

*De Quincy (2000) argues that the study of consciousness within Western science and philosophy is polarized between “investigations of third-person, objective correlates and investigations of first-person, subjective experience and phenomena”; there is a paucity of second-person models (intersubjective, or relationship-centred) in Western approaches to consciousness studies. This logically follows into education; as 21st century learners evolve, the learning needs evolve. The challenge in graduate study programs of post-secondary institutions can be to progressively innovate in order to attract professionals while providing a learning community of collaboration and engagement in a virtual world, as well as an opportunity to self-author their own learning experiences. This article follows the journey of three learners engaged in individualized, self-created courses (directed studies) resulting in a collaborative final project.*

### **Key Words:**

Intersubjective knowing, hybrid, participatory, collaboration, learning community.

### **Introduction**

Twenty years ago, each of us spent countless hours in our university libraries. We fumbled our ways through microfiche films and basic word-processing programs. Our course syllabi were rigid and required conformity with emphasis on essays for assessment. We didn't question this traditional academic model. Why would we? That was the very nature of post-secondary education.

Now, imagine an innovative and interactive educational paradigm that challenges this traditional model. At SelfDesign Graduate Institute (SDGI), studies are inspired by the mission statement of the process of self-designing; “SelfDesign is centered on the understanding that we as human beings have the capacity to author our own lives from a place of resourcefulness, creativity, and possibility.” (SelfDesign Graduate Institute, 2016). Through courses and directed studies, SelfDesign promotes authentic self-discovery and respect for the rights of all learners, young and old, to assume responsibility for their own learning paths (Cameron & Meyer, 2006; Marshak, 1997).

In this article we share our inquiry as we co-create a learning experience, engaged in individualized, self-created courses (directed studies) resulting in a collaborative final project. At SDGI, directed study begins with a learner choosing a topic or issue to explore—and a faculty mentor with whom to engage in the study. The curriculum of each directed study then evolves from conversations between the learner and the faculty mentor through which both parties collaborate to construct the study in an emergent manner. Having the three of us combine our directed studies was unprecedented in our graduate program. In this article, we ask the question “What new learnings arose as we co-created this learning experience, entering the intersubjective space as SelfDesigners?”

### **Beginning:**

We came together in the spring of 2016. Three individual learners, accepting the invitation of a faculty mentor at the SelfDesign Graduate Institute (SDGI), to join in a collaborative and enter a directed study (DS) course called ‘Learning from Life: Self reflection, Contemplation and Conversation’. Focusing on the idea of biography, the focus and intent in this DS was to develop leadership, personal/professional offerings from areas of ongoing research, to find individual strengths through practice, to learn through mentoring and professional sharing, and approaching the directed study learning in an interdisciplinary gesture with journaling, individual and group art and movement exercises. We were intentionally bringing our own stories and journeys to create offerings for a workshop, in which attendees would have an opportunity to acquire a sense of clarity, meaning, and purpose as the basis for engaged action in their work and education; “throughout the weekend we will explore a variety of contemplative practices, including mindfulness, exercises in compassion, journaling, and dialogue. These practices cultivate capacities essential in educational environments—focused attention, deepened understanding of course content, greater kindness and compassion, and enhanced contemplative inquiry and insight. Participants will have opportunities to connect with one another, become part of a community committed to contemplative practices in education, and focus on their own life rhythms, challenges and possibilities.” (Workshop Pamphlet, 2016). The idea of the academic retreat as a course stemmed as an innovation to online courses; where individuals participated in a directed study with their mentoring faculty but where these individual learners came together for engagement and dialogue with their common faculty mentor even though each learner has a completely different course of study. The academic retreat was the learning celebration at the end of the course; bringing together the directed studies that each learner had designed for themselves, mentored by one academic facilitator.

In the spirit of a self-renewing learning community and intersubjective knowing, we embarked on this journey, with the guidance of our faculty mentor. Her role was as co-collaborator, fully engaging in her own personal learning as she brought this to our course. We each met with her three times on an individual basis via web-conferencing software, as well as three meetings as a collective (also using web-conferencing software). At these sessions we shared our passions, ideas for our offerings at the workshop, and gleanings as we moved through this learning process. We were able to move to ideas above and beyond what our faculty mentor was providing. Equally important was staying connected between meetings; using Google docs and a Google community, we continued to share our learnings and offerings. We shared one common document on Google + for our learning while each maintaining separate documents with our mentor.

The course involved participatory learning. Throughout the course our focus was that at the end of our learning journey we would invite community into our learning with an offering allowing them to participate and gain knowledge from each of our individual courses. As we moved through this journey individually and together, we reflected on how we had developed this community in a virtual world. Learners meet virtually in courses. We were pleasantly surprised to be feeling a strong connection to each other around the idea of coming together at the end of a virtual course. This blend of synchronous group and individual meetings, with space in between meetings, allowed for intersubjective knowing to emerge. Intersubjective theory has surfaced in recent decades from diverse developments in consciousness studies, integral studies, philosophy of the mind, transpersonal psychology and feminist critical theory among others (Gunnlaugson, 2009). De Quincy (2000) argues that the study of consciousness within Western science and philosophy is polarized between “investigations of third-person, objective correlates and investigations of first-person, subjective experience and phenomena”; there is a paucity of second-person models (intersubjective, or relationship-centred) in Western approaches to consciousness studies. To backtrack, first person approaches explore individual, internal consciousness, while third person approaches look to external, objective correlates of consciousness. Second-person approaches expand Western approaches to consciousness studies in a holistic manner, by looking to intersubjectivity to account for the inter-reflexivity of consciousness, reflected in dialogic consciousness (Bohm, 1996); “there is something about the nature of consciousness, it seems, that requires the presence of the other as another subject that can acknowledge my being. When I experience myself as being experienced by you, my experience of myself—and of you—is profoundly enriched, and in some encounters, even transformed.” (De Quincy, 2000, p. 148). In this way, consciousness ‘shows up’ as a co-creativity between or among the participants, opening the way for a deep exploration of relationship or intersubjectivity.

Traditionally, learning theorists have concentrated on intellectual development and preparing students for occupations, what Gunnlaugson (2011) calls ‘third person learning’. However, other theorists have questioned this approach, created a large and rich history of learning approaches with terms such as alternative, holistic, contemplative, and integral. Within selected educational contexts, the notion of interpersonal learning has been applied to a community of learners approach, focusing on the common elements of attention, understanding and communication

(Gunnlaugson, 2009). Framed as a move from egocentric to sociocentric thought, intersubjectivity has served the educational processes of dialogic instruction, focusing on the interrelationships between teacher, student and content. Ultimately, this sets the context for students to experience integral forms of transformative education, mediated by deeper intersubjective dimensions of teaching and learning; this experience focuses on the interconnected, dynamic elements of the learning process, which cultivates compassion and an 'education of the heart' (Dalai Lama, 1999, in Gunnlaugson, 2009).

### Our individual and collective stories

In this section, we share our individual stories and reflect on the question "What new learnings arose as we co-created this learning experience, entering the intersubjective space as SelfDesigners?"

#### *Deb's Story:*



**Image 1: Learner Artefacts (motivational words, reflective canvases and props) on display for participants at the culminating graduate course workshop offering, May 2016**

I view my life story as a tapestry with many colourful threads. The threads may be somewhat tattered in places and others look shiny and new. The weave is tight in some spots and very loose in others. There are threads of pain, anger, laughter, trauma,

heartache, goodness, faith, love, unrest, peace, and joy. At this point in my life, I can stand back and look at that tapestry with all its awe and wonder, breathe in deeply, and BE!

For many years I felt trapped by the trauma and hardships I experienced. For seasons, I viewed myself as a victim. During other seasons, I was an overcomer or survivor. Now I know I am a “thriver!” I no longer stayed in despair. I began to live in freedom! The thread that wove its way through my tapestry to this new found liberation is JOY. So, what was the change for me? How did I start having the capacity for noticing and living in joy? For me there is a direct connection to the time that I’ve engaged in my master’s degree. Somewhere along the way in the past three years, I began to engage in an insatiable search for answers to some of my questions about my resilience through traumatic episodes and other circumstances in my life.

I’ve also added more tools to my toolkit (such as positive mantras, a variety of journaling techniques, digging deeper into my faith, and more). But I’ve learned that the tools are not used as a formula to get to an answer. The tools, by themselves, are not joy. Everywhere we turn we are offered courses, books, meditations and more that promise happiness and joy. I wonder if our North American culture of privilege and materialism signify a “consumer” approach to acquiring joy. I don’t think the tools are intended for us to go through a “spiritual bypass” meaning not fully engaging in all of our emotions in our life experiences. Rather, they offer assistance in the awareness of the joy as it arises. I have come through some dark seasons and yet have had the capacity of noticing the arising of joy amidst the anguish and unpredictability.

I’ve known there is a difference between happiness and joy. However, it’s been difficult for me to find the right language for this knowing and continued curiosity within me. As I began research about joy, it was important to me to clarify the differences between happiness and joy. I really value stories! I believe everyone has a story to share! The research methods I lean toward the most are biography and autoethnography. Reeves, Kuper, and Hodges (2008) describe autoethnography as a qualitative research method that studies “social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organisations, and communities. As I continued to listen to soulful stories, engage in rich conversations, and read articles about joy I discovered that many people use the terms happiness and joy interchangeably. I think there is a significant difference between the two. Happiness seems dependent upon life circumstances (more superficial) and joy seems independent of circumstances and resides much deeper.

I have danced with this concept of joy for over 20 years so I decided to engage in this directed study with two initiating questions, “How have others explored the notion of joy arising in the midst of trauma, pain, hurt, and chaos? How does my experience relate to this exploration of others?” I studied these questions in a variety of ways. I read numerous articles and books about others’ experiences with joy, about emotional intelligence highlighting joy, I journalled extensively about my own experiences, and I gently listened to friends’ stories as they shared about their trials they’ve overcome in life.



My research evoked even more questions and curiosity concerning the capacity of noticing joy arising and choosing to live in that joy. What is one to do with the arising of joy? I know I have experienced a sense of denying joy because I felt guilty in accepting it when grieving. Sometimes I have chosen to see it and put it aside for a while because it wasn't time to engage in the joy. I needed more time of reflection, or to feel anger, or to dive deeper into grief. The difference for me is now I actually notice the concentrated drops of joy rather than never noticing them at all. I am empowered to choose how and when to engage in the joy and also when to release it.

In response to our inquiry question "What new learnings arose as we co-created this learning experience, entering the intersubjective space as SelfDesigners?", I decided the best way to continue dancing with this notion of joy was to introduce it as my offering for this course's collaborative final project during our academic retreat. I invited participants into an interactive workshop entitled, "Joy in Unpredictability." I wove my own personal narrative throughout the workshop sharing some of the shadows of my life. Participants engaged in discussions about their tools, comparisons and contrasts of joy and happiness, and creative artistic activities with the theme of noticing joy arising in midst of hurt and pain. I was profoundly impacted by the richness of group conversation and humbled by the level of vulnerability and openness of each of the participants. The outcome of the workshop aligns with the research I had engaged in: joy is linked to releasing, joy is grounded in gratefulness, and joy is linked to the smile of the heart which brings humility and gentle humour to all we do! (Sullivan, 2010)

### Laurel's Story:

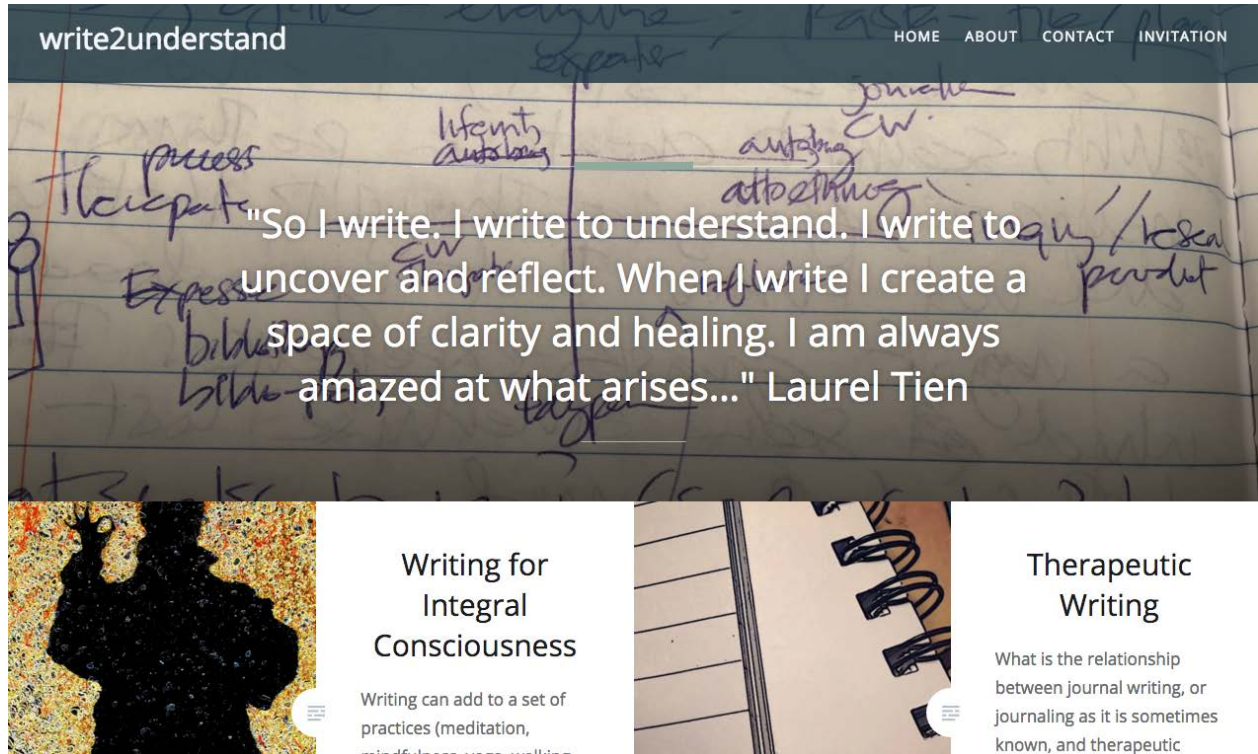


Image 2: Home Page from Website created for the course, May 2016

*Stumbling forward  
With hard will and pen in hand  
I write with my heart*

I came to SDGI with moral distress and a niggling question about student engagement. The experience of daily writes and autoethnography has grown into a central tool in this process. If autoethnography is the "process of reflecting and writing with the intent to connect empirical knowledge generated through the observations and analyses of others WITH personal knowledge grounded in active intimate hands-on person patient and personal connection" (Ellis and Bochner, 2014), then writing with an autoethnographical perspective allows you to take the stories with you, stitching them into your own accounts weaving them back into your own life stories. Only an insider can describe the nuance, the complexity, the emotion, and the meaning of these experiences as she has understood and live them.

I have been known to hide in my world of academia. Bracketing out the everyday world--even what I have been party to creating -- and focus on one thing, putting it on a pedestal and looking at it intently. It's usually a heady or objective concept, removed from the everyday world. It's easier that way. To be able to ignore all else and focus on something as it is removed from the everyday world. I feel safe and sheltered. Maturana and Verden-Zöller (2008) write of this, calling it an essentialist reality, where certitude and objectivity exist. However, if "the search for our true self is impossible to fulfill in this essentialist reality space as the answer is not in the domain is everyday living" then the essentialist reality approach denies that the body is fundamental to human knowledge, human understanding, and human consciousness.

### **The body is seen as a limiting factor.**

Over the past few years I've been introduced to a different way of looking at the world, through graduate work in Art Education and more recently through my experience with SDGI, where I have experienced this different way of knowing, through that way of knowing. Maturana and Verden-Zöller (2008) call this constitutive reality, where what a human being understands arises through her body dynamics in the conversation of living in interactions with the medium that makes it possible. All of this occurs in our relational space in the realization of our body dynamics. In sum, it starts with our own experience, adding to the conversations that create a multi-verse through a common sphere of cooperation. There is no single privileged access to this reality, as each is fully legitimate and valid, although perhaps not equally desirable. In this space, a belief in absolute truth leads to the suppression of other ways of thinking and understanding.

I think of how my presence in this constitutive reality has been strengthened over the last year with SDGI. How entering this community of inquiry has helped me live and be in the space as opposed to my previous academic experiences of mostly talking about it. Researching it. Objectifying it. But not do-ing it on a daily basis.... I can also see how in the process of living more in the objective space, that I got a bit stuck in it. It's promise of control and stability, of calmness and truth. I look back and grieve for lost moments when I hid in this safe space, or ran away from everyday life to this oasis of objectivity. I grieve for the gifts that I ran past and did not see. Having lived in that space for so long, I have to intentionally tell myself to slow down and notice the everyday.

But negating this space is not helpful either. I can see a place for each space, and a benefit to intentionally living in both, in dancing between the two. Each of these two spaces offers its own reality, its own set of truths. So my goal is to strengthen my ability to be in each and to notice which space I am in...

One helpful mitigating tool I have developed to go between these two worlds is to write. I have developed a reasonably good daily writing practice... To stop and listen... I write through my fog in my thoughts. I see landmarks and I vent ideas and feelings... I'm always amazed in the gems in what I pour into the page...what arises in the synchronous journey. This writing reflection time as a 'moment of madness'...of possibility, of newness and uncertainty, of hope. And of self-love. I find the framework of autoethnography to be useful as I dance between these two ways of knowing; autoethnography is posited to be the "process of reflecting and writing with the intent to connect empirical knowledge generated through the observations and analyses of others WITH personal knowledge grounded in active intimate hands-on person patient and personal connection" (Ellis and Bochner, 2014). Writing with an autoethnographical perspective allows you to take the stories with you, stitching them into your own accounts weaving them back into your own life stories. Only an insider can describe the nuance, the complexity, the emotion, and the meaning of these experiences as she has understood and lived them.

As a part of this Directed Study and a way to dig deeper, I took two online writing courses; Therapeutic and Reflective Writing, and Writing as a Spiritual Practice. I started these courses with the spirit of deepening my own daily writing practice and leaning into my relationship with these writes. The intent, from a pragmatic standpoint, was to strengthen this relationship in preparation for possible use as a data generation tool for my SDGI thesis. To more fully immerse myself in this experience, I initiated a website to share these learnings in a structured format, invited SDGI members to a 30 x 30 writing challenge, and continued to do my daily writes with summaries in by blog. All of this culminated in my offering to the workshop participants, on the experiential process of expressive writing; called Writing to Understand.

In response to our inquiry question "What new learnings arose as we co-created this learning experience, entering the intersubjective space as SelfDesigners?, with the support of this Learning from Life group, I was able to feel and stumble my way through the various ways of expressive writing outlined in the courses. My relationship with writes HAS deepened through this journey, I feel more confidence, more definition, more experience with these different ways/methods/access points...I feel more able to pull out and utilize these methods when I feel my need going in that direction.

I do find that I start with my 'usual' entry point. I don't think of a specific question or prompt...I just write and see what arises. Meeting Myself at the Table. What IS this table? Stuff that is unseen by me yet. I stumble in and wander around. When I see something that resonates, I am able to go deeper, using the prompts and tools from these courses. And my trust in this process.

*Presencing deeper  
Building understandings  
Just breathe and stay here*



**Erin's Story:**

**Image 3: Found poems photographed, inspirational books and reflective photography as products of the learner's journey on display for participants at the culminating graduate course workshop offering, May 2016.**

At what age do we lose our creativity? At what age do we decide we are not creative? When I was five years old, I was creative. I got lost at the sewing machine for hours making doll clothes and other textile projects. Cutting, measuring, and making my own patterns on freezer paper then laying this out on fabrics of velvet, gingham and mixed fibres, a creative project would emerge from my small hands maneuvering layers through a borrowed sewing machine. There was no question as to whether I was creative. The projects are my artifacts of creativity. My five year old self was eager to let people know I was creative.

Since August 2015 I have worked on having a creative life of writing, art, and textiles while struggling to decide to be in control of my own fate professionally and personally. Turning towards truth has been a thread in my master's journey. Discovering that I can be the author of my own life has been the light at the end of my path.

At some point I realized I need work-life balance. I looked around and asked myself, why am I the only one with the 80 hour work week? Why is there high turnover in this profession of education? Educators sign up to change the world. I needed to take action, make my own life and leadership my thesis, my action project, and focus on saving myself. I wanted to make changes for my life and family. Feeling stuck by not taking control, work is in control of my story, and I need to have the byline of my biography.

Working in education affected me. Working in a shame culture, “a culture in which conformity of behaviour is maintained through the individual's fear of being shamed” as defined by Oxford University Press (2016), affected me. It affected me by what I was seeing, being exposed to and the fact that I can't do anything about it. The realization that I can't help kids. Contemplation and reconciliation. I became an educator to help kids. I did not become an educator to not help kids. “Every person wants to be healthy, that's your natural state.” was the most profound learning from a webinar with Dr. Amy Johnson, author of *Being Human* (2013). I don't want the past to define my life. I want resilience and joy to surround me.

Working in a job where I cannot be creative, pushed by mandates and standardized tests, I worked to differentiate if it was me, the job, or other factors. The course I designed allowed for me to give myself permission to take steps. Steps of healing. Steps of empowerment. Steps of resiliency. Discovering vulnerability and scarcity led to an evaluation of what is important in life. Presence is the most important thing I can offer myself, my family and in my work.

I came across Brene Brown in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of my master's program my directed study, designing my own course, allowed for further reading into her work. I relished the notions, the examples and the words of her books. Her words from *Rising Strong* (2015) resonated with me.

*“With skinned knees and bruised hearts;  
We choose owning our stories of struggle.”*

Owning my own story also meant finding myself. Finding my element. Influenced by Sir Ken Robinson (2013, pp 10-17) reveals ideas for finding your element by changing your perspective, mind mapping, creating vision boards, and using automatic writing. Automatic writing is the process of writing that starts with a question or prompt. The idea is to write. Write what comes to you without expectation. Using your writing, you choose the aspects that resonate and create the vision. The automatic writing assists thought exploration. I merged the automatic writing process with another writing practice, proprioceptive writing. Linda Trichter Metcalf (2016) describes proprioceptive writing as “a method of exploring the psyche through writing.” In her description of the proprioceptive writing process, writing is done in 25 minute sessions with conditions and atmosphere created for relaxation and reflection. In my own writing, I use proprioceptive writing to narrate experience and discovering my life stories. Merging automatic writing and proprioceptive writing throughout the directed study resulted in creating a vision for my life moving towards positivity.

What new learnings arose as we co-created this learning experience, entering the intersubjective space as SelfDesigners? In response to the inquiry question, the outcome was a vision with a strong theme of creativity, the need to bring creativity back into my life. Rather than one year to a writing life, as many people choose for sabbaticals, my desire was one year to a creative life as healing and as a journey to find my core values again. The course that I designed was the culmination of a year-long journey.

My research allowed for me to begin to examine my core values and how they play a role in my life and leadership. Research allowed for me to experiment with Indigenous

research methods, autoethnography and auto-biography, shaping the beginning of where my story will go with myself as the author of my past, present and future. Writing opened up expansive avenues of unmapped creativity.

Breathing reflections deeply, I worked with what is. I was curious and moved into a different level of activity. In mixed media art, I took inspiring words out of the realm of my mind. I used textures and colours to create something 3D outside of me. I am taking the emotion out of the invisible realm of my mind and bringing it outside of myself into something tangible. The products of my journey in creativity and leadership have become joy and possibility.

## **Conclusion:**

In this article we shared our journey of co-creation in a learning experience, engaged in individualized directed graduate studies resulting in a collaborative final project. In the spirit of inquiry, we ask the question “What new learnings arose as we co-created this learning experience, entering the intersubjective space as SelfDesigners?” We are aware that this learning is subjective and based on the experience that each participant brings to the intersubjective space; for this reason we acknowledge the limitations of this method. This model requires trust, engagement in the unfolding process of learning, and a healthy welcoming and respect of diversity. However, we share our stories in the spirit of qualitative inquiry, with the belief that this model is a valuable alternative to traditional ways of knowing, and a clear operationalization of intersubjective learning.

Mindful collaboration while creating one’s own course has allowed for unique threads to arise during the academic retreat experience. Questions of curiosity concerning the capacity of noticing joy arising and choosing to live in that joy. Entering a community of inquiry facilitated presence and engagement. Researching it. Objectifying it. Finally, examining one’s core values and their role in life and leadership shapes one’s story with the self as the author. These unique threads were combined into the community offering facilitating the engagement of participants that showed up for this intersubjective learning experience, moving through chaos into something emergent and new (Combs, 2002).

De Quincy (2000) argues that the study of consciousness within Western science and philosophy is polarized between “investigations of third-person, objective correlates and investigations of first-person, subjective experience and phenomena”; there is a paucity of second-person models (intersubjective, or relationship-centred) in Western approaches to consciousness studies. This logically follows into education; as 21st century learners evolve, the learning needs evolve. The challenge in graduate study programs of post-secondary institutions can be to progressively innovate in order to attract professionals while providing a learning community of collaboration and engagement in a virtual world. Three introvert master’s students with diverse backgrounds of nursing, education and social work have innovatively challenged the synchronous format of many graduate course designs collaborating to create a design to meet not only their own unique learning needs, but the learning needs of professionals in the 21st century: An innovative model in graduate level course design.

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