

Applications of process-oriented psychology in academia

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ABSTRACT

This contextual essay is a description of an educational project where I facilitated a Processwork based support group for postdoctoral researchers. Over the last four years, during my postdoc at the Oregon Health & Science University, I realized that developing Processwork skills was crucial to my thriving in academia. To externalize my internal discoveries, I developed a support group for postdoctoral scholars to answer the question, “Can process-oriented approaches provide psychological support to postdoctoral researchers at OHSU?” The goal of the project was to provide psychological support to postdocs through various Processwork exercises and group processes. In the third chapter of this essay, I present the designed curriculum and the results from my work with postdocs. In the last chapter, I discuss the important contributions of this study to the Processwork community and the limitations of this study. As I explored myself through the Processwork paradigm, I developed a deeper understanding and excitement for my career path. While working with the postdocs, I learned that Processwork approaches were and will be an appreciated form of support in academia.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all researchers committed to life in academia. Let's use our awareness to bring the dreaming process into the research we are doing. Let's not get stuck in consensus reality, but access all three levels of reality to live a full, rich life in academia. I give thanks to the Oregon Health & Science University and the Casey Eye Institute. It has been a pleasure working for such an amazing company. I'd also like to thank my two bosses, Mark Pennesi and Gaurav Sahay. They have supported me financially over the past years and allowed me to take time off work to attend residencies. I have appreciated their support so much. A special thanks to Michael Matrone and the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs for supporting my event by booking the rooms and advertising to the postdoc community. I deeply appreciate the participants of the postdoc support group for their willingness to explore themselves, for trying something new and sharing their experience with me. I am grateful to Ingrid Rose and Dawn Menken, my study committee for their continuous support over the past two years of studying Processwork. I'd like to thank my therapists, Kara Wilde and Susan Kocen for helping me in the final hours to complete all my program requirements. Lastly, I'd like to thank my dream figures for their consistent support throughout my life journey.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My deepest hope is that I am able to share with you how the tools of Processwork can help people navigate their professional lives. I share distinct examples of how I have been using Processwork to navigate the field of academia. Throughout the paper I use Processwork¹ terminology, which is explained in detailed in the glossary (Appendix A). To date, I am a Research Assistant Professor at the Casey Eye Institute affiliated with Oregon Health & Science University. I received my B.S. in Chemistry and Ph.D. in Biomedical Science from the University of Florida. I moved to Portland in 2014 to start my postdoctoral training in the lab of Mark Pennesi, MD/PhD. I have been studying inherited retinal dystrophies for almost 10 years and have 17 peer reviewed publications. During the last four years, I have been able to successfully transition from a Postdoctoral Trainee, to a Postdoctoral Scholar, to a Senior Research Associate and finally to a Research Assistant Professor faculty position. The most interesting part is that four years ago, I also decided to start my Processwork journey and I was quite sure that I wanted to leave academia. I was struggling with my boss and I didn't think that doing research in academia was a true expression of who I was. I wanted to get a Masters in Process-Oriented Facilitation so I could apply to a job at the Dougy center and facilitate groups of youth grieving the death of immediate family members. I was sure this type of career would be more satisfying and provide a sense of wholeness. To me, the interesting part of my final project is that I wasn't really trying to learn how to use the Processwork tools to navigate my career in academia. That wasn't my goal, but that is exactly what happened. As the quote from TS Eliot goes,

“we shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” (Eliot, 1943)

To me, at the end of my Processwork journey, I find myself back at where I started many years ago, a dedicated scientist desiring to develop cures for blindness. This has been my passion since I was 11 years old and I am now, more than ever, feeling dedicated, alive, and a sincere confidence in my path.

The following is the structure of this essay. In Chapter 2, I share my personal story integrating Processwork theory with my personal development. More specifically, I explain how exploration of my childhood and recurring dreams lead to the understanding of my deepest self and provide allies that help me navigate academia. I also share how I used Processwork to navigate several interpersonal relationships in the lab.

Feeling inspired by what the Processwork paradigm provided for me, I asked the question, “Can process-oriented approaches provide psychological support to postdoctoral researchers at OHSU?” To answer this question, I designed a support group for postdoctoral scholars which consisted of four, 2-hour sessions. During the sessions, participants were led through Processwork exercises and group activities on the topic at hand. In Chapter 3, I share the content of the courses, the feedback from the participants and the learning gained from this experience.

I conclude this essay with quality criteria, limitations and specific contributions this exploration provides to the Processwork community. It’s now time to sit back, relax and enjoy the journey.

As you read my story I hope you connect with your own. I hope you remember times that you have faced adversity, times when you were struggling to understand who you are and what your path is in this large world. I hope you can remember how you yourself found the answers to your own questions and fought for something you wanted. I also hope that as you read this you find something you can share as you mentor others around you, as you inspire other minds to travel the path of the great unknown.

CHAPTER 2

PERSONAL STORY

Instead of sharing my story in chronological order, I want to share specific ways in which I have used Processwork to navigate the last four years of my career in academia. I would like to start with the intrapsychic level², sharing dreams and memorable personal development moments that solidified my identity as a scientist. Next, I move to the interpersonal level³ and share the ways I used Processwork to navigate several relationships with co-workers. Working on both of these levels significantly boosted my enthusiasm for working in academia.

Using dream work to discover my identity as a scientist.

Shamans claim that you never go into the unknown without an ally who can help you in the other world (Mindell, 2001, p. 169). My dream figures⁴ are the allies that I bring with me to the world of academia. In Processwork we learn that our childhood dream⁵ holds all of the key energies needed to navigate our lives (Mindell, 2001). These manifest through dream figures and objects. The childhood dream contains our wholeness, our complexity and the recurring energies that dictate our lives. In studying my childhood dream, I found core energies of mine that are very useful in my career.

In my childhood dream Lindsay, my best friend, and I are playing ball on the bank of a big, blue lake. All of a sudden, an alligator comes out of the water and eats Lindsay whole. I wake up screaming.

In working on this dream again and again in therapy, I have developed a true understanding of the alligator. The alligator knows exactly what she wants, she goes after it and eats it whole. The alligator is confident, ancient, intelligent and resilient. In order to anchor this secondary figure, I bought a green dress that had a texture of what I thought could mimic alligator skin. I wore that dress proudly to work and felt into my alligator nature, walking confidently through the lab, knowing what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it. Prior to the Masters of Arts in Process-Oriented Facilitation program, I did know this part of myself. I have enjoyed work in my life because it is one of the places I feel most confident and can easily take leadership. It's been very helpful to understand where this comes from, name this dream figure and step into my confidence more authentically.

As a teenager I had the following recurring dream.

I dreamt that a big, orange fox, running on its hind legs, was chasing me around a clubhouse. (This was the golf and country club that my family owned.) I would bang on the doors, trying to get people to see me, but the doors were locked and no one would notice that I was getting chased. I was so scared! I kept running from the fox. I usually woke up from this dream in a panic.

Over the past four years, I've been asking the question, "why are you chasing me fox?" That was a very difficult question to answer so first, I worked on the qualities of the fox. The fox is clever, fast, clear, resilient, graceful, astute and creative. These were all qualities of myself that I needed to be more aware of. I needed to notice how I expressed each of these qualities. In examining this

further, I realized that I used most of these qualities at work. I am a creative and clever fox prancing around the lab keeping up with the fast-paced needs of the lab.

The qualities of the fox are not the only important aspect of this dream figure. This dream figure is chasing me. Over my life I feel as though something is chasing me, propelling me to achieve the next goal. Once I achieve one thing, I start the very next project. In academia this energy will aid in your success. There is always the next grant to write, manuscript to publish, and promotion to work towards. You are constantly chasing in your career. After about six years of being in this field, I started questioning whether this constant chase was healthy for me. I wondered why I kept pushing and who was chasing me. I questioned if I was a cruel tyrant. In addition, I started to question if there was something wrong with me because I kept wanting and needing more. I was in constant conflict with my fox. In the most beautiful process, the fox finally shared authentically what it was doing. The fox wrote:

Dearest Renee,

Please remember all your accomplishments thus far this year. Please allow these accomplishments to soak into every cell of your body. For I do not chase you to MAKE you run fast. I chase you so that you can SEE how fast you run. I am not a tyrant trying to deplete you. I am here to meet you in your strength and power. I am here to generate change and aid in the evolution of this world you cannot yet see. I love you Renee. I am here with you always, meeting you in your strength, courage, power and wisdom. Do not be afraid.

Love, Fox.

Wow. What a powerful message I was not expecting. This dream figure is a big part of why I am a successful scientist. I have been and always will be meeting new goals and new challenges, so I can feel my strength, power and courage. Thanks dear fox!

As an adult, more specifically, over the past four years, I have had the following recurring dream⁶.

I'm in some kind of animal facility and there are cages housing some kind of rodents, usually mice. One mouse hops out of the cage and then another and another. I'm trying to catch the mice and put them back into the cage, but the number of mice seem to multiply. I can't get the animals back in the cage. It's awful! (This also happens in real life at times, which is also not pleasant.)

According to spirit animal symbolism and meaning, the qualities of a mouse include enduring, adaptable, and have great focus (Sams & Carson, 1999). Mice are known for their ability to survive the toughest living conditions. They focus predominately on finding food and surviving. People that have the mouse as their totem are usually modest, meaning they are not focused on materialism. They know their limits. They are kind, genuine and very goal oriented. This is another dream figure that is essential to my success in academia. I attribute their traits to helping me strengthen my survival instincts. When things get challenging I can connect to my mouse dream figure, adapt to the situation at hand, focus on the next task and navigate my way out of a tough situation.

Another memorable piece of personal development work happened when my therapist asked, “Why the eye?” “How did you get into this field and why?” When unfolding these questions, a profound insight came. My life tendency is to “make the impossible happen”. After this session I could see the many decisions I made throughout my life that allow for situations where I can facilitate the impossible. Just to name a few, I could see this pattern in my relationships, trying to save addicts, trying to develop cures for blindness, and taking on challenging clients. I have a deep need to feel how I can make the impossible happen. I create impossible situations and navigate them so I can feel alive and have purpose. When reflecting on this theme now, I think I want myself and others to see our immense power and strength. As I continue to make the impossible happen, I hope to open new avenues and possibilities for those behind me. Thus, contributing to the evolution of our world.

To conclude this section, I want to make the point that understanding the qualities of my dream figures helped me to see the qualities of myself that help me succeed in academia. It’s now very clear how and why I am able to work in this environment. When I am struggling I can call on these allies and lean into these qualities as I need them. In addition, it’s very important to understand what each of these dream figures is doing. For example, the alligator eats things whole and the fox chases. I have seen these recurring patterns during my whole life. I will need a career where I can take on entire projects that have specific goals that I can keep chasing. This is part of my nature. It’s not something to fear or change, but to live into fully. I now understand that I chose this career so I can experience my wholeness.

Working well with others is necessary to succeed in academia.

In my very first Processwork session, I wanted to work on a challenging situation concerning my boss. I felt tense and uneasy in his presence. I didn't know how to interact with him. My therapist's first intervention was to have me act out my boss so that she could get to know him. At the time I was shocked by this intervention. I knew this paradigm was different and I was intrigued. In acting out my boss through movement, language and mannerisms, I was able to get to know and understand him better. My therapist then interacted with 'him' while acting as me. As we switched back and forth, I was able to practice different ways of interacting with this awkward character. I felt as though my boss was invading my space. In playing out this role, I learned to pick up this energy and be more invasive myself. Now, when my boss walks into the room I ask him lots of questions. I ask him about his weekend, his day and how he's feeling. This new behavior has completely shifted our dynamic. I have been able to successfully work with him for over four years. This feels like a big accomplishment.

For about two years, we had a laboratory technician who worked really slowly. I tried many different interventions to motivate him to work faster and more independently. I tried punishment, encouragement, rewards, and annual reviews. Nothing worked. His behavior never changed. At a Mindell seminar in Yachats, Arny and Amy Mindell introduced the idea of entering another person's time and space (personal communication, 2017). Using the Mindell-led exercise, I entered into the time and space of this lab technician. I was surprised at what I experienced. His sense of time was never-ending and his sense space was expansive. After stepping into the shoes of this co-worker, I stopped trying to change him and accepted him for who he was.

I was able to utilize an important communication tool based on accusation theory⁷ to work on conflicts with a postdoctoral scholar who worked in our lab for two years. She is from China and about the same age as myself. During my Processwork studies, I learned how to make clear, direct accusations and how to take accountability for any accusations directed towards me. I used to get defensive when I was accused of something, but Processwork taught me that there is at least 2% truth in any accusation. This idea has helped me take accountability when accused, which dramatically mitigates conflict instead of making it worse.

This postdoc and I had many difficult interactions. In one meeting, she told me that she felt like I didn't trust her. I picked up this accusation honestly and told her I didn't trust her when it came to experiments because she was making mistakes. Although this feedback was hard to hear, she appreciated that I validated her experience. I continued the conversation by appreciating her for her dedication and hard work. Once this postdoc recognized that I could validate her experience and then change my behavior after she brought a concern to me, she felt comfortable bringing more issues to my attention. I appreciated the learning, the practice and the rank awareness. Towards the end of our work together, a very different skill was needed in our relationship. We were writing a manuscript together. Every time I gave her feedback about the manuscript, she would have a big feeling response. Usually, I would make space for her feelings and encourage her to bring them out. However, at the end, I realized I actually had to say no to the emotions to help us focus on the job at hand. When I set a boundary, her entire atmosphere shifted and we were able to focus on the paper and get the writing done. Our paper was published in March of 2019.

My examples above demonstrate that many interpersonal Processwork interventions including exploring the energy of the other, entering a person's space and time, picking up accusations and taking one's own side fully are useful for navigating relationships with co-workers. These examples demonstrate the applicability and accessibility of these tools when we chose to focus on the interpersonal level. When working long hours on a collaborative team, good relationships are essential to success in academia.

CHAPTER 3

POSTDOC SUPPORT GROUP

During my time as a postdoc, I had many difficult situations to navigate from disturbing co-workers, to making decisions about my career path, to finding a work life balance, and many more. The Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) has an Office for Postdoctoral Affairs that offers consultation, workshops, seminars and community gatherings for all postdoctoral scholars. Furthermore, students and postdocs get free counseling at the Joseph B. Trainer Health and Wellness Center. I used all these services at different times throughout my postdoc.

However, I still felt as though support was a secondary process. Especially group support where we talk about the system we are in, the difficulties that come with that and how we are all traversing these difficulties. With this in mind, I designed a postdoctoral support group, where I facilitated Processwork exercises and group processes⁸. The Processwork paradigm offers novel approaches for support that differ from the conventional methods mentioned above by: 1) not being goal-oriented, but focusing on process and increased awareness, 2) exploring the unknown, 3) engaging the whole body with multiple sensory experiences and 4) integrating multiple levels of consciousness (Diamond & Jones, 2005). The purpose of this project was to determine if process-oriented approaches provide psychological support to postdoctoral researchers at OHSU. I offered and designed four sessions which I thought would allow the participants to gain new awareness about their own process and the system they work in. From initial reflection and feedback questions, I was able to discern effective methods.

In order to offer this support group, I met with the Postdoctoral Affairs Officer, Michael Matrone, PhD. Michael was happy to support my endeavor by booking the room for the event

and advertising the event to all the postdocs at OHSU. I made a flyer with all the sessions listed (Appendix B). Below is a description of each session, an explanation of the topic and Processwork approaches used and the learning from each session.

Session #1.

I held the first session on September 20th, 2018. It was during postdoctoral appreciation week. The first session was entitled, “**Get in touch with your purpose!**” In academia, it’s difficult to keep motivated on projects that take years to complete. Acquiring data, publishing manuscripts and submitting grants all take time. We are in it for the long haul. I found that it’s difficult to stay motivated, especially when we might encounter so many failed attempts during the process. In this session, I wanted to give participants an opportunity to get in touch with their deeper purpose for being a postdoc, in hopes that it would motivate them. There were 5 participants during this session.

During this session, I first had participants fill out a consent form (Appendix C) and answer the initial reflections questions listed below. I had participants answer initial reflection questions in hope of assessing whether the topic was relevant.

Initial reflections.

1. How often do you question your career choice?
2. Is this career path meeting your expectations?
3. Are you still in touch with the original vision that launched you on this career path?

Participants could choose numbers 1 through 10 (1-meaning “not at all” and 10-meaning “very much so”). The average response to questions 1, 2 and 3 was 5.8, 5.8 and 5.7, respectively. From this initial reflection, I sensed that some participants were questioning their career choice and some were not, some thought the career choice was meeting their expectations and some did not and some were in touch with their original vision and some didn’t have one. There was diversity in the group.

After the initial reflections, I planned some ice breakers. I had the participants make whatever they wanted with pipe cleaners, then we went around the room and participants shared their name, what they made with their pipe cleaners and what brought them here. Next, they completed the exercise listed below. Finally, each participant shared their career path and one thing they were taking away from this session.

Exercise.

Using the paper, crayons, markers, stickers, etc. make a collage of your career path.

When making your collage, use these questions to help guide you.

- What support did you get along the way?
- What events opened new doorways?
- What were key moments that got you here?
- What was happening in the world during these key moments.
- What were you dreaming along the way?
- Have you experienced any body symptoms along the way?

When you're finished creating your path, look at it from above, what vision comes to you when you think of how this path will continue?

As mentioned previously, I wanted the participants to start this series by remembering their journey and how they got here so they could connect with their purpose. In order to bring in the dreaming⁹ and the more secondary¹⁰ content, in the exercise, I asked the participants to think about body symptoms, dreams and world events. I hoped these questions would help inspire different elements to come into their stories instead of moving from one school/graduation/job to the next. This intervention worked very well. I was surprised at all the content that came from each story. Some participants moved to get away from family, one participant's partner had a serious illness, and many were grieving the loss of loved ones. I was thinking that particular science projects were calling these participants forward, and for some it was, but for the majority there were much deeper family history processes moving them forwards. During this first session, I remember noticing that the group was very professional looking and wondering if they were going to color and play with pipe cleaners. At the beginning, many had their laptops out ready to take notes. Shortly after seeing all the art supplies on the table they put their computers away. The participants loved the coloring and the pipe cleaners. They were all so creative. In academia it is very primary¹¹ to be goal oriented, fast-paced, and consensus reality¹² focused. I realized that this support group was a space that was allowing secondary processes to emerge including slowing down, self-reflection, and creativity through art.

At the end of the session, I asked the participants for feedback (Figure 1). Participants were asked three questions. I gave them small green squares with sticky tac on the back to place on the

feedback form. I left the room so they could give their feedback confidentially. I was very pleased to see that the participants thought the approaches used were worthwhile. To me, that means that they liked using the arts and crafts to express themselves and they liked thinking about the questions asked. Perhaps they liked the group therapy feeling. In addition, most people learned something new about themselves and their path, meaning that exploring their journey with a process-oriented approach was helpful to gain new awareness. For some, this experience will positively impact their relationship to work. I'm not surprised by the feedback from this last question. I had a hope that this session would help motivate the postdocs to stay on their path, but I wouldn't be surprised if doing this work would also help some gain clarity that this isn't where they want to be. There's not a correct outcome, my ultimate goal is to help increase each individual's awareness of their own process. If I were to offer more sessions focused on exploring career paths, I would design exercises that allow participants to unfold their childhood dreams and chronic body symptoms. I hypothesize that exploring childhood dreams and chronic body symptoms would allow for each individual's life myth to emerge, which could then also be linked to their career path.

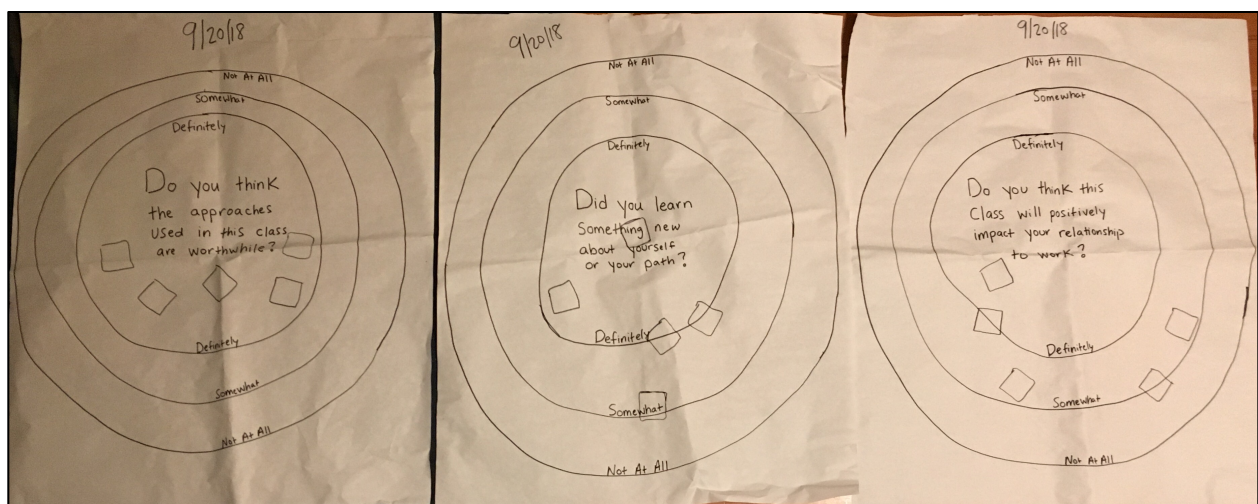


Figure 1. Feedback from **Get in touch with your purpose** session on 9/20/18.

Session #2.

I held the second session on October 4th, 2018. The next session was entitled, “**Working with a disturbing energy**”. We all encounter disturbing people in the lab whether it be a co-worker, boss, or intern. These disturbances can have a big impact if left unaddressed. It’s important to transform these disturbing experiences into something useful. In this session, I wanted to create a toolkit for enhancing relationships in the workplace. There were 3 participants at this session.

During this session, I first had participants fill out a consent form (Appendix C) and answer the initial reflections questions listed below. I had participants answer initial reflection questions in hopes of determining if the topic was relevant.

Initial reflections.

1. How often are you disturbed by someone you work with?
2. How often does conflict between co-workers get resolved in your work environment?
3. How confident do you feel in your conflict resolution skills?

Participants could choose numbers 1 through 10 (1-meaning “not very often” and 10-meaning “very often”). The average response to questions 1, 2 and 3 was 6.7, 4.2 and 5.7, respectively.

From this initial reflection, it was clear to me that these participants, like myself, were in conflict with others in the lab and that the conflict doesn’t usually get resolved. Some participants felt confident in their conflict resolution skills and others did not.

After the initial reflections, I gave an overview of the series to orient all three new participants to the class. Then, I started this class with the inner work¹³ listed below. Before working on the conflict at hand, I wanted the participants to fully connect with themselves and find an ally or helpful powers that could help them in their situation. Thus, I decided to have participants access their earth-spot¹⁴.

Inner work.

-Take a moment to get comfortable. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

-Take a minute to go inside and focus on your breath.

-Now, let's go on a journey to find your most favorite earth spot. This can be a place in nature, including waterfalls, mountains, or volcanos. This can be in outer space near the stars or the sun. Or it could be in your comfy bed. Allow yourself to go to your most favorite place on earth.

-Using the paper, crayons and markers, draw your earth spot. As you draw, express, and create your earth spot think of its inherent powers. Find all the powerful energies in your earth spot. If you can't find any energies you associated with power. Notice the energies that interest you.

After the inner work, the participants shared their drawings and take-home messages. Next, the participants performed the following exercise. During the preparation for this course I sought out supervision. My original plan for the exercise was to have participants start acting out or picking up the energy of the disturbers. However, my supervisors and I thought this might be too much for the first intervention. Thus, I decided to start by having the participants validate their own

side and feeling experience as a first step. In academia, postdocs can easily be mistreated by unfair rank¹⁵ dynamics. People in power rarely have to take accountability for their actions and people with less power have to deal with the impacts alone. I was hoping this exercise would give these participants a chance to stand up for themselves now, if they hadn't had a chance to do that yet.

Exercise.

1. Think of a boss or co-worker that you have been in conflict with. Think about a specific difficult interaction. What happened?
2. What are the feeling attributes of this interaction? Make a note.
3. Take some time validate your feelings and frustrations. Fully take your side and give yourself permission to participate in this interaction exactly as you want to.
4. What are the feeling attributes of this new interaction? Make a note.
5. How can you use this quality in your everyday life?

In reflecting on this session, all three people came with a disturbing incident or person to work with. All three participants were able to find and draw an earth-spot. They each enjoyed taking time to go inside and connect with themselves. One participant said they were going to put the picture of their earth-spot up in their office. After the participants performed the exercise, we discussed each person's situation. It turned out that in real life, each of them had already validated their experience and was working through in the conflict. For example, one participant was looking for other jobs and planned to leave the abusive situation she was in. Another participant figured out that she could work different hours than the person she was in conflict

with. The other participant, already talked to her boss's peer and asked him to advocate for her. At the time, I didn't really understand what help/support they were needing so I focused on validating their experience. I also praised them for the fact that they were actively working on things and finding solutions.

In terms of process structure, I see now that the participants were identified as victims in the different situations they were in. Each one of them was in a process of leaving the victim role and finding empowerment to change their circumstance. It was important for them to take authority, feel powerful and create their own circumstances. Academia is known for its sexism, and in two cases a higher rank male mistreated a lower rank woman. But it was more complex than that. In one case, there were also cultural differences at play in the relationship styles. In another case, it was two woman that were in conflict over rank dynamics.

At the end of the session, I asked the participants for feedback (Figure 2). The work that we did in this class didn't support the participants capacity to deal with the conflict in their work environment, but they did like the approaches used in the class. To me, this means that they did like doing the inner work, the exercise, and the support, but I didn't provide them with any additional tools. I hypothesize that having these participants pick up the energy of the disturber would have been a helpful new tool. As mentioned previously, to be sensitive to potential trauma, I decided to start this series by encouraging participants to validate their own experience. However, in a future session focused on this particular topic, I would teach participants how to identify the energies of the disturber and utilize them for themselves. Utilizing the appropriate metaskills¹⁶ will be important to access the secondary energy (Mindell, 1995). I hypothesize that

demonstrations and explaining what is being done and why will be helpful to get maximum participation.

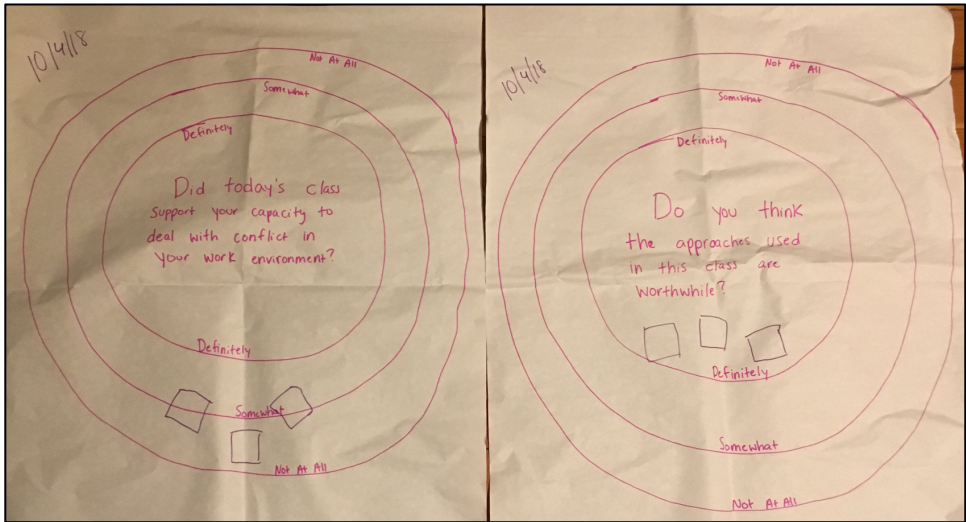


Figure 2. Feedback from **Working with a disturbing energy** session on 10/4/18.

Session #3.

Session three entitled, “**Stress, anxiety and overwhelm. How do we manage it?**” was held on October 18th, 2018. In academia, we work for a deadline system. We work long hours to hit significant deadlines, which leads to copious amounts of stress, anxiety and overwhelm. In this session, I wanted participants to first, explore their normal reactions to deadlines and then secondly, provide them with way in which to access a new perspective that allows for spaciousness and ease. There were 5 participants at this session.

During this session, I first had new participants fill out a consent form (Appendix C) and answer the initial reflections questions listed below. I had participants answer initial reflection questions in hope of assessing whether the topic was relevant.

Initial reflections.

1. How often do you experience anxiety due to an upcoming deadline?
2. How often do you experience overwhelm due to your job responsibilities?
3. How confident do you feel in your ability to manage stress?

Participants could choose numbers 1 through 10 (1-meaning “not very often or not very confident” and 10-meaning “very often or very confident”). The average response to questions 1, 2 and 3 was 8.6, 9.2 and 4.9, respectively. From this initial reflection, I realized that this topic was very relevant. Almost all the participants experience anxiety and overwhelm very often due to being a postdoc. Some participants were confident in their ability to manage stress and others were not suggesting that more tools could be helpful and appreciated.

I started this session with an inner work with the main goal of having the participants experience the anxiety in their body. I wanted them to better understand how they experienced anxiety and overwhelm. I also wanted the participants to see if they could transform this anxiety experience or body symptom into something useful for them. Thus, I decided to have them shape shift into the symptom maker¹⁷.

Inner work.

-Think of a time you were stressed, anxious or overwhelmed in the lab. It may be because of a grant deadline, lab meeting presentation, multiple experiments running simultaneously. You may even be experiencing that right now. Go back to that time.

-Now being back in that experience. How do you know you are experiencing anxiety/overwhelm or stress? Where is the experience located in your body? Do you feel tension in your chest, is your heart beating fast, are you experiencing emotions, do you have a headache, shallow breathing, sweaty hands, a shaky voice?

-Get very clear about how this experience lives in your body. Where does it happen in your body and what happens?

-Pick one specific body experience and amplify it, allow your entire body to experience it. If it was tension, allow your whole body to tense up. If it was pressure allow your whole body to feel the pressure. If it was shallow breath maybe hold your breath for a moment. When you are amplifying this experience, believe in the expression of this experience. Allow yourself to express this experience more globally for just a moment.

-Now we are going to shape shift into the one causing the symptom. If you have a headache squeeze something, if your experience shaking, you are now the one shaking something, if your heart is beating beat on the drums.

-Drop the content and get into the experience of what you are doing. What's good about it? What's right about it?

-Now let a figure emerge. Maybe this figure has a face, a way they walk and talk and do things. Who is doing this? What are you doing? Let yourself become this figure and get to know them.

-Give your everyday self a tip. How would they/do they deal with stress, anxiety and overwhelm?

-Make a drawing of this inner work. You can draw the body symptom, the figure that emerged and make a note of the tip.

After the inner work, I planned a group process. The goal of the group process was to have the group share about their experiences of anxiety/overwhelm/stress and how they managed it. I wanted to map the roles at play. During the group process I asked the following questions to keep the process following.

Group process.

- Have people share what they have tried in terms of managing stress
- People can also just share about the stressors they have encountered
- What creates the stress, anxiety, overwhelm? Who are the stress makers?
- How does perfectionism play a role?
- Name some process work strategies: these are important experiences that have messages, amplify them and use them, heat it up, express it,
- How do we get out of the victim role?
- How do we use the power of the stress maker for creativity, mastery and to finish tasks?

In reflecting back on this session, the inner work was very challenging for folks, especially the shape shifting into the symptom maker. Participants were easily able to identify the anxiety/overwhelm in their body and amplify it, but shape shifting into the symptom maker was challenging. I didn't have props and pillows, which would have been helpful. In addition, I wasn't satisfied with my demonstration. I became shy and didn't explain things fully. I felt a lot of resistance during the inner work, but I kept encouraging the participants to keep going. I went around the room and helped each one into a more secondary energy. For example, one

participant ended up at the most beautiful spacious house in the mountains and drew that.

Another participant drew a picture of her stressed out figure and her relaxed figure. She added an angel and devil theme to the two characters.

Overall, this was a great learning moment for me. The group process went really well. We were able to map some roles in the field including: deadlines, the government funding agencies, and the overworking primary investigator. During this process I could see participants learning about themselves. One participant realized that she has parents that are very strict and now she puts enormous pressure on herself to perform. There was a general consensus that the participants themselves are creating a lot of the stress and anxiety. The missing role is a primary investigator with a good work/life balance. A researcher that doesn't let the deadlines take over their lives. That role was brought in by people sharing about bosses they have worked with before that do have good work life integration.

At the end of the session, I asked the participants for feedback (Figure 3). Most of the participants thought the approaches used were worthwhile. The inner work was successful at helping participants understand more about how they experience anxiety/stress/overwhelm. Some participants left with new tools for managing stress. If I were to expand this session into a series, in the next session, instead of having participants access the symptom maker, I might try having the participants unfold the physical proprioceptive¹⁸ expression of anxiety. Sometimes anxiety is a form of excitement. For each person the experience itself will hold a unique, more unknown experience or message. In the group process, the internalized oppressor was named as a source of anxiety/stress and overwhelm. In subsequent sessions, I could facilitate an exercise that

gives the internalized oppressor language, allows for interaction, and utilizes the internal oppressor's energy to relieve the anxiety/stress and overwhelm.

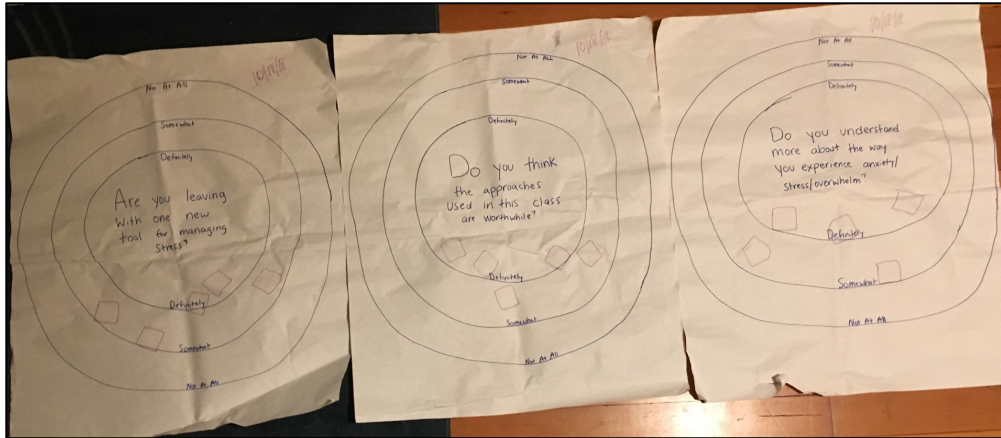


Figure 3. Feedback from **Stress, anxiety and overwhelm. How do we manage it?** session on 10/18/18.

Session #4.

The fourth session entitled, “**Writing, writing and more writing! What’s your relationship to writing?**” was held on November 1st, 2018. As postdocs, we are encouraged to write as many grants and manuscripts as we can, as quickly as we can. Our success is usually based on our ability to write. Writing is a process that may evoke frustration and resistance. In this session, I wanted to explore 1) participant’s relationship to writing, 2) pinpoint specific mental patterns that create writing blocks and 3) provide tools on how to make this process flow. There were 2 participants in this session.

During this session, I had participants answer initial reflection questions in hopes of determining the relevance of the topic.

Initial reflections.

1. How many manuscripts are you expected to submit during a two-year postdoctoral fellowship?
2. How many grants are you expected to submit during a two-year postdoctoral fellowship?
3. How many years have you been a postdoctoral scholar?
4. In that time, how many manuscripts have you submitted?
5. In that time, how many grants have you submitted?

Participants wrote in their answers. One participant responded with 6-8, 1, 1, 0, 0, to each question, respectively, while the other participant responded with 2-3, 0, 2, 0, 0. These responses show that even though the participants are expected to be writing, they have yet to submit any manuscripts or grants. To me, this suggests this topic is highly relevant to postdoctoral scholars. They are needing more support to meet their writing expectations.

I started this session with a group process focused on writing blocks and tools. I used the following questions to guide the group process. The topics that were discussed are shown in Figure 4.

Group process.

- What is the writing expectation for postdoctoral scholars?
- What are your blocks to writing, let's brainstorm and write them out.
- Brainstorm tools, what are things you know you could do that would help?

Examples: Self-love, finding meaning in the block, find the tiniest part that can write and amplify it, stream of consciousness writing, involve the muse, use the universe or higher power and let it write, have a good writing spot, do something else and come back to the writing

-Stress of having to write so much

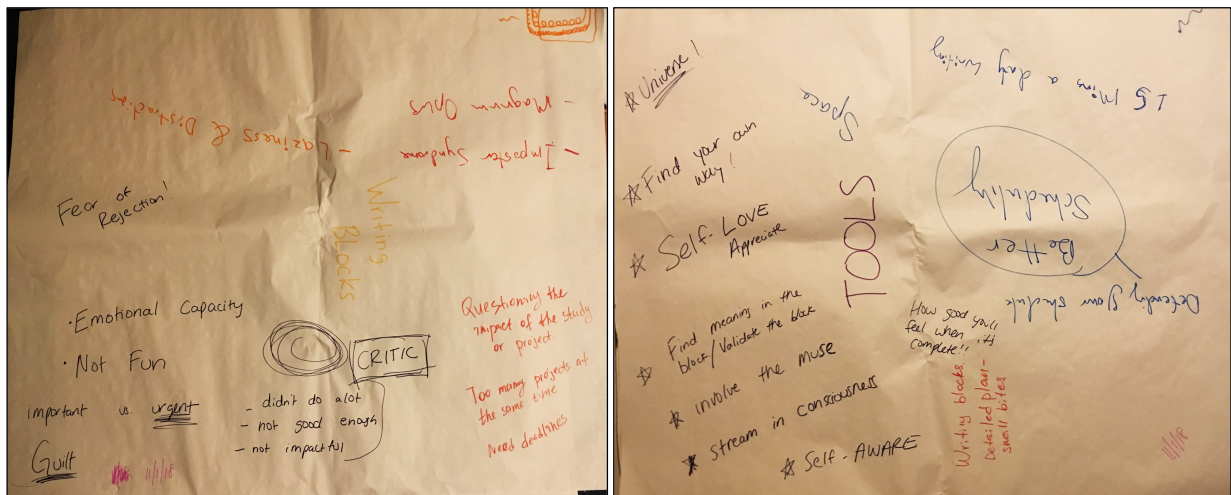


Figure 4. Writing blocks (left) and tools (right) that were discussed during the **Writing, writing and more writing! What's your relationship to writing?"** session.

After the group process I had the participants perform the following exercise. This exercise allowed the participants to interact with the critic and access a new part of themselves, their inner writing coach.

Writing exercise.

-Write down your most well-known writing block or issue. Write down your problem.

Get to know the problem and how it manifests. Write in more detail about it. What

happens? Get to know this block.

-Then, take a minute to access a writing coach, have the coach write back what you should do to get through this block. (You can use some examples we discussed earlier).

Make sure to write in a different color when you respond as the coach.

-Then dialogue back and forth between the one with the writing block and the coach that has inspiration to overcome the block. Maybe you don't agree with the coach or question the coach. Maybe you agree, but don't know why you aren't able to do it. Let a flow come dialogue back and forth.

Lastly, I wanted the participants to experience overcoming a writing block in multiple sensory channels so I had them perform this last exercise.

Experiential exercise.

-Use the crayons and markers to decorate your block (Appendix D) any way you'd like.

You can write all of your writing blocks on this block.

-Then, stomp on you block. As you stomp on your block, feel the power in you that can overcome this block.

-Visualize how you can overcome this block (or think of your block as thin as this little piece of paper).

In reflecting on this session, I thought this session was very successful and one of my favorites.

During the group process we used the process-oriented approach of mapping out the roles to understand what creates writing blocks and brainstormed tools for overcoming the blocks.

Themes consisted of the critic¹⁹, perfectionism, and imposter syndrome. I was surprised by these themes, the participants were critical not only of their writing ability, but of their projects and the validity of their work. That's a difficult critic to overcome. The writing exercise was great! The internal coach had answers to all the issues. It was so great to hear their own advice. Participants were at first identified as stuck, but then through their coach they accessed a more fluid state. Again, the participants enjoyed the creativity through arts and crafts. The one difficulty during this session was facilitating two people. Only having two people there I could spend a lot of time focused on each participant. I was struggling to know how much time to spend on each person. I was wondering how could I have encouraged more peer support and stayed out of it.

At the end of the session, I asked the participants for feedback (Figure 5). The participants thought the approaches in the class were worthwhile and they left with at least one new tool for overcoming their writing blocks. Only somewhat did the participants understand their writing blocks better. I think that's because they came in with much awareness about their blocks. The best feedback I got from this class was that one of the participants started his own writing support group after I ended this series of sessions. His writing group is still going on today, supporting postdocs with the writing of manuscripts and grants. In the future, I may add sessions that focus solely on working with the critic. I could teach participants how to access important messages from the critic and pick up the energy of the critic to overcome the writing blocks.

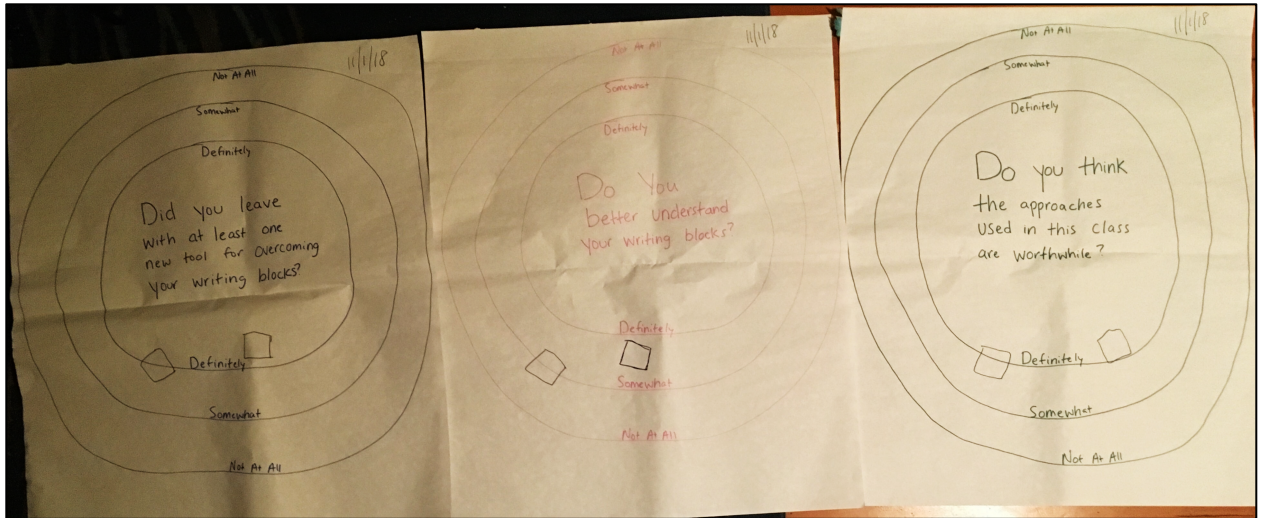


Figure 5. Feedback from the **Writing, writing and more writing! What's your relationship to writing?"** session on 11/1/18.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

During this study, I tried to ensure quality data collection in multiple ways. I reached out to the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPA) for help with recruiting participants. In using the OPA, my event invitation reached every postdoc on the OHSU campus. I hoped that by reaching the entire postdoctoral scholar community I would have a large, diverse group of participants. However, overall there were 10 participants. One participant attended 3 sessions, 3 participants attended 2 sessions and 6 participants only attended 1 session. I did not obtain demographic information from my participants. Although I tried to reach a broad community, one of the limitations of this study is the small number of participants and that demographic information wasn't collected.

I obtained feedback through initial reflection questions and post-session questions. The initial reflection questions were useful for determining if the session topics were relevant for postdocs. Based on both verbal feedback and the initial reflection results presented in Chapter 3, these data suggest that the topics I presented were relevant to the postdoc experience. The two most relevant sessions were the ones focused on stress, anxiety and overwhelm and the one focused on writing blocks. Initial reflection results from both of these sessions were the least variable between the participants. Perhaps the most salient feedback is that one of my participants has now initiated a writing group that meets twice a week.

The post-session questions were designed to determine if the participants both appreciated the approaches and found them useful in some way. In order to ensure quality data, I left the room and allowed participants to answer these questions anonymously. The most consistent feedback I

received from these questions was that the approaches used in this class were worthwhile. However, some classes provided more insights and learning than others. There are many limitations to these feedback questions, but here I will name a couple. I only asked three feedback questions. There could have been many more that would have helped uncover what was most useful about these sessions. Additionally, language can mean different things to different people. These questions were very limiting because they were not free response questions, where participants could give as much feedback as they wanted in their own language. My questions may not have spoken to everyone's experience. In addition, the creation, execution and facilitation of this study was impacted by my personal bias and experience as a postdoctoral researcher. My personal experiences associated with each topic most likely narrowed my view and marginalized different postdoctoral experiences.

Contributions to the field.

Overall, I feel as though these sessions were a novel form of support for postdocs, which was appreciated. From my facilitator perspective, I think the class itself provided a container that encouraged academics to bring out secondary ways of being. For example, participants gave positive feedback when expressing themselves through arts and crafts. I also noticed participants positive feedback when they were invited to do inner work. They appreciated taking a moment to slow down, breathe deeply and connect to something inside themselves. Based off my personal experience and facilitating these sessions, I think this process-oriented psychological support is needed in the academic field. And not only do I think this kind of support is needed in academia, but I think my study shows that it can be received. In this essay, I offer topics, inner works and

exercises that can be utilized in many places in academia. In the future, I would love to offer this class to graduate students. It is also possible to incorporate these exercises during work or faculty retreats. My personal story shows how each of us in the academic field can be a 007 Processwork agent, meaning that we can use the tools to bring the dreaming into the academic environment. I felt that by finding my dream figure allies and getting in touch with the part of my identity that is satisfied with the academic framework provides me with the support I need to thrive.

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APPENDIX

A. GLOSSARY

1 – Processwork: an awareness modality with applications in areas such as organizational and community development, diversity and leadership training, spiritual practice, individual psychotherapy, relationship counseling, and group work.

2 – Intrapsychic level: focusing on one's own psychology.

3 – Interpersonal level: focusing on the psychology of two people in relationship.

4 – Dream Figures: dreaming processes are experienced initially as the "other." It is found in statements that describe that which is "not me." These things that are "not me" or "other" are referred to as dream figures.

5 – Childhood dream: a dream that a person has had between the ages of 3 to 7 years old and is remembered into adulthood. It is thought to reveal an archetypal or mythic pattern for a person's life.

6 - Recurring dream: a dream that repeats multiple times.

7 - Accusation theory: a method of dealing with double signals that focuses on the effects they produce: accusations. The accused can always pick up a little of the dreaming and learn more about themselves.

8 - Group Process: a method of group transformation and conflict resolution. A way for groups to work on their identity, internal conflicts, disturbances and overall development.

9 - Dreaming: the world of imagination, emotions and non-consensus.

10 - Secondary: unintended communication, the unknown identity.

11 - Primary: intended communication, the known identity.

12 – Consensus Reality: the world of objects, people and events.

13 – Inner work: working on oneself internally.

14 – Earth-spot: a person's favorite place on earth, though it does not need to be of this earth.

15 – Rank: a synonym for power suggesting fluidity and negotiability; a dynamic network of power in motion, shifting up and down a hierarchy, which in turn depends on the given context.

16- Metaskills: Each therapist's unique style that helps individuals access secondary material.

17 – Symptom Maker: a secondary figure that emerges when you unfold body symptoms.

18- Proprioceptive Channel: A person's internal feeling experience.

19 – Critic: a marginalizing force that is usually structured by a belief system, which renders an experience secondary.

B. EVENT FLYER

Support Group for Postdoctoral Researchers

A process-oriented approach to psychological aspects associated with the postdoctoral research experience

September 20th, October 4th, October 18th, November 1st
4pm-6pm

Meeting Descriptions

These meetings are available for all postdoctoral researchers. Whether you are struggling or thriving or somewhere in between, you are welcome here. This is an opportunity to explore all aspects of our postdoctoral experience.

Session 1: Get in touch with your purpose!

It's difficult to keep motivated on projects that take years to complete. Acquiring data, publishing manuscripts, submitting grants, these all take time. We are in it for the long haul. How do we stay motivated, especially when we might encounter so many failed attempts during the process? In this meeting, we will perform an exercise that will allow you to get in touch with your deeper purpose for being a postdoc.

Session 2: Working with a disturbing energy.

We all encounter disturbing people in the lab whether it be a co-worker, boss, or intern. These disturbances can have a big impact if left unaddressed. It's important to transform these disturbing experiences into something useful. In this meeting, we will create a toolkit for enhancing relationships in the workplace.

Session 3: Stress, anxiety and overwhelm. How do we manage it?

In academia, we work for a deadline system. Working long hours to hit all these significant deadlines leads to copious amounts of stress, anxiety and overwhelm. In this meeting, we will perform an experiential exercise that will first enable you to explore your normal reactions to deadlines and then secondly, provide you with way in which to access a new perspective that allows for spaciousness and ease.

Session 4: Writing, writing and more writing! What's your relationship to writing?

As postdocs, we are encouraged to write as many grants and manuscripts as we can, as quickly as we can. Our success is usually based on our ability to write. Writing is a process that may evoke frustration and resistance. In this meeting, we will explore 1) your relationship to writing, 2) pinpoint your specific mental patterns that create writing blocks and 3) provide tools on how to make this process flow.



Facilitator: Renee Ryals, PhD

I am currently a Senior Research Associate with dual appointments at OHSU and OSU. I was a postdoctoral researcher from 2014 to 2018 at the Casey Eye Institute affiliated with OHSU. During my postdoc, I was able to publish four peer-reviewed research articles and receive a career start grant from the Knights Templar Eye Foundation. In addition, from 2015 to 2017, I earned a Masters of Arts in Process Oriented Facilitation and Conflict Studies. My current goal is to transition to a full-time conflict facilitator, supporting researchers working in academia.

C. CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Renee Ryals is currently enrolled in an advanced process-oriented facilitation postgraduate program at the Portland Processwork Institute. This postdoc support group series is inspired by Renee’s final project entitled, “Personal and professional applications of process-oriented psychology in academia.” Renee will use this teaching experience, completed surveys and any feedback provided to create her final project. During the creation of her thesis, Renee will report on her experience, but exclude all personal identifying information so participants will be anonymous.

Confidentiality Statement

In order to create a safe container, it’s important that everyone keeps experiences shared confidential. Outside of this room we may share our own personal experience and new learnings, but we never share information that could disclose the participants in the room and their personal experiences.

By signing below I acknowledge that I read, understand and agree to the information above.

Print Name

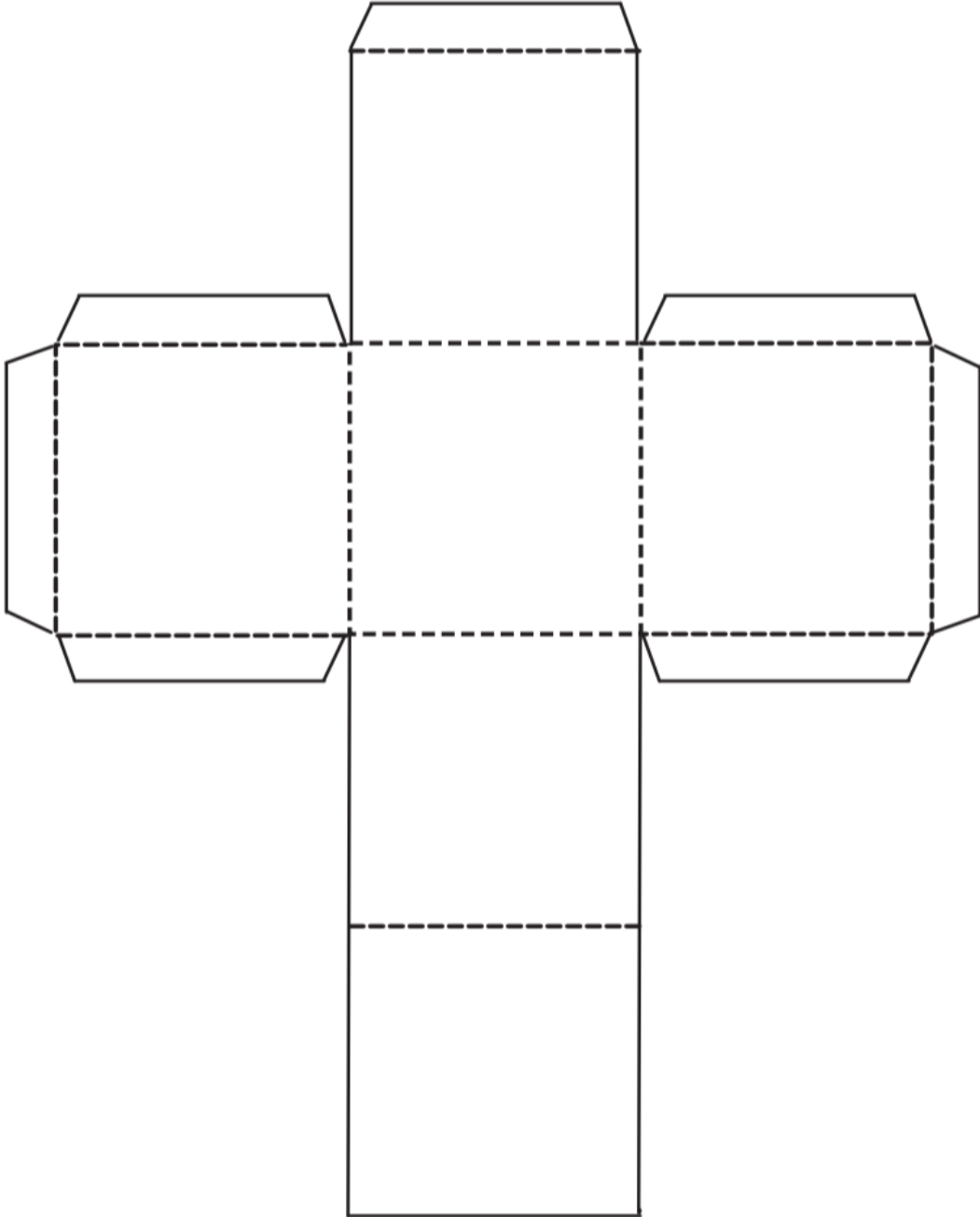
Signature

Date

D. WRITING BLOCK TEMPLATE

Cube Pattern

Cut on solid lines - Fold on dashed lines



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