

Transparency in Social Work: Having the Difficult Conversations

Dr. Carolyn Oliver, Elizabeth Jones and Allyson Rayner

The Problem

How do you teach courage?

The trend towards participatory learning approaches means that students are increasingly called on to speak up in defence of their values and boundaries in classrooms and practicum settings. This is particularly true for social work students; the ability of social workers to 'speak up' is central to their professional resilience, effectiveness in helping relationships and ability to advocate for social justice. We can work to create safe classrooms supporting open discussion, reflection and rehearsal of transparency skills, and we can teach students what they might say. Still, when faced with real world 'difficult conversations', fear of the consequences often keeps students silent.

Our project sought strategies to help students learn how to brave potential negative consequences in order to speak their truth. In a practicum seminar course (SOWK 316), the everyday struggles with practicum supervisors, colleagues and service users became emotionally engaging learning opportunities around which to build curriculum supporting students to have difficult conversations in a safe way.

Literature

Huish, R. (2013). Dissent 101: Teaching the "dangerous knowledge" of practices of activism. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 34(3).

May, D. R., Luth, M. T., & Schwoerer, C. E. (2014). The influence of business ethics education on moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage: A quasi-experimental study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 124(1)

Oliver, C., & Charles, G. (2015). Enacting firm, fair and friendly practice: A model for strengths-based child protection relationships? *British Journal of Social Work*, bcv015.

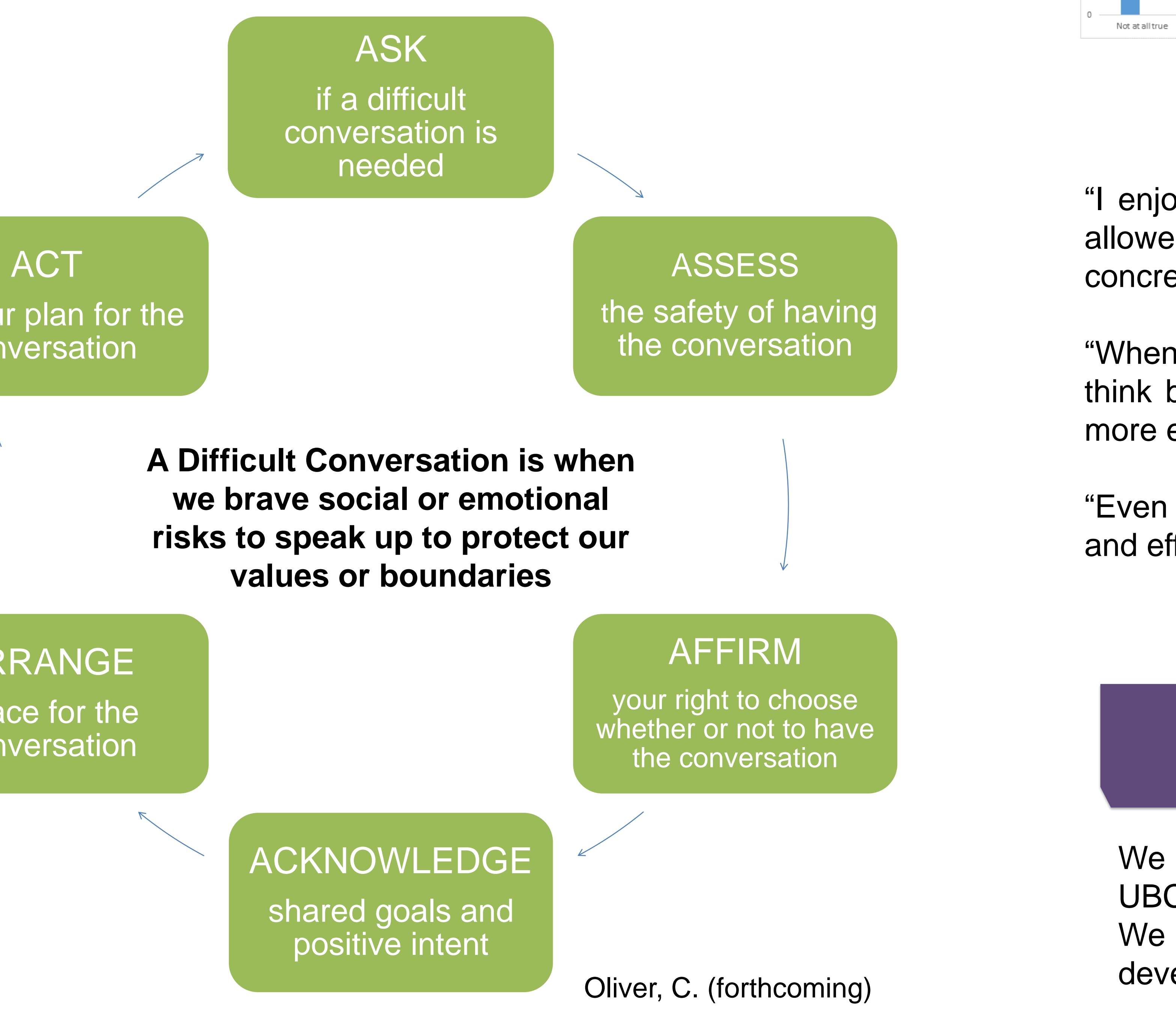
The 6A's model was adapted from Rushton, C.H. (2006) Defining and addressing moral distress: Tools for critical care nursing leaders, *AACN Advanced Critical Care*, 17 (2).

The Project

With past students, we developed new curriculum including:

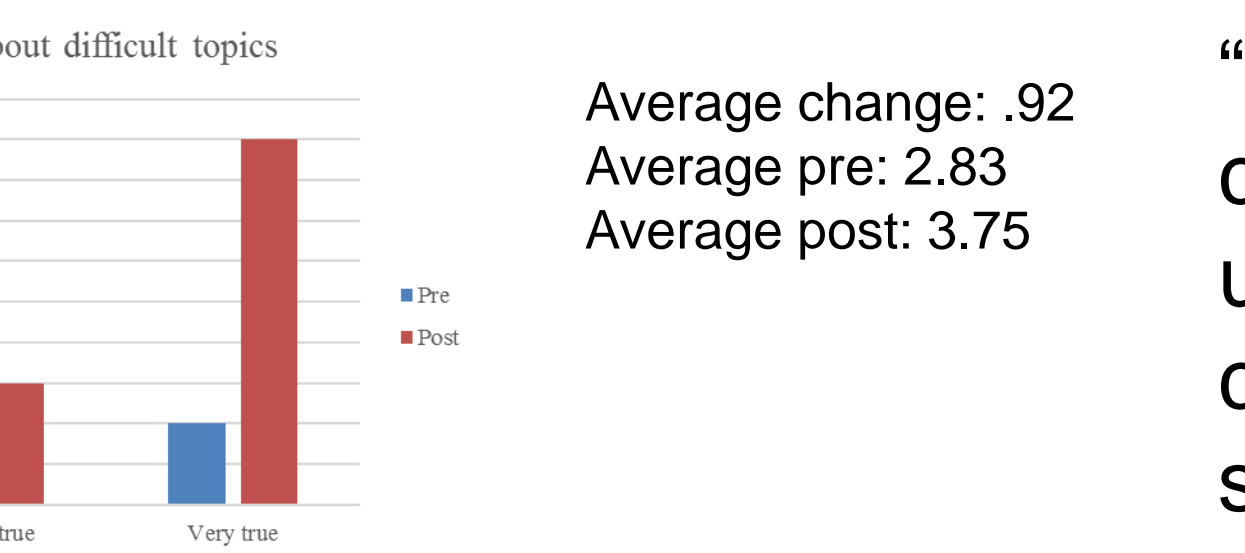
- An original model for how to have a difficult conversation
- A wallet card and learning activity asking students to 'play their difficult conversation card' in a real-world situation
- Story-telling by past students
- Moral courage self-reflection measures
- Emotional regulation activities
- Role plays
- Small group discussions

With current students, we are evaluating the new curriculum through focus groups, an online survey and pre/post measures.

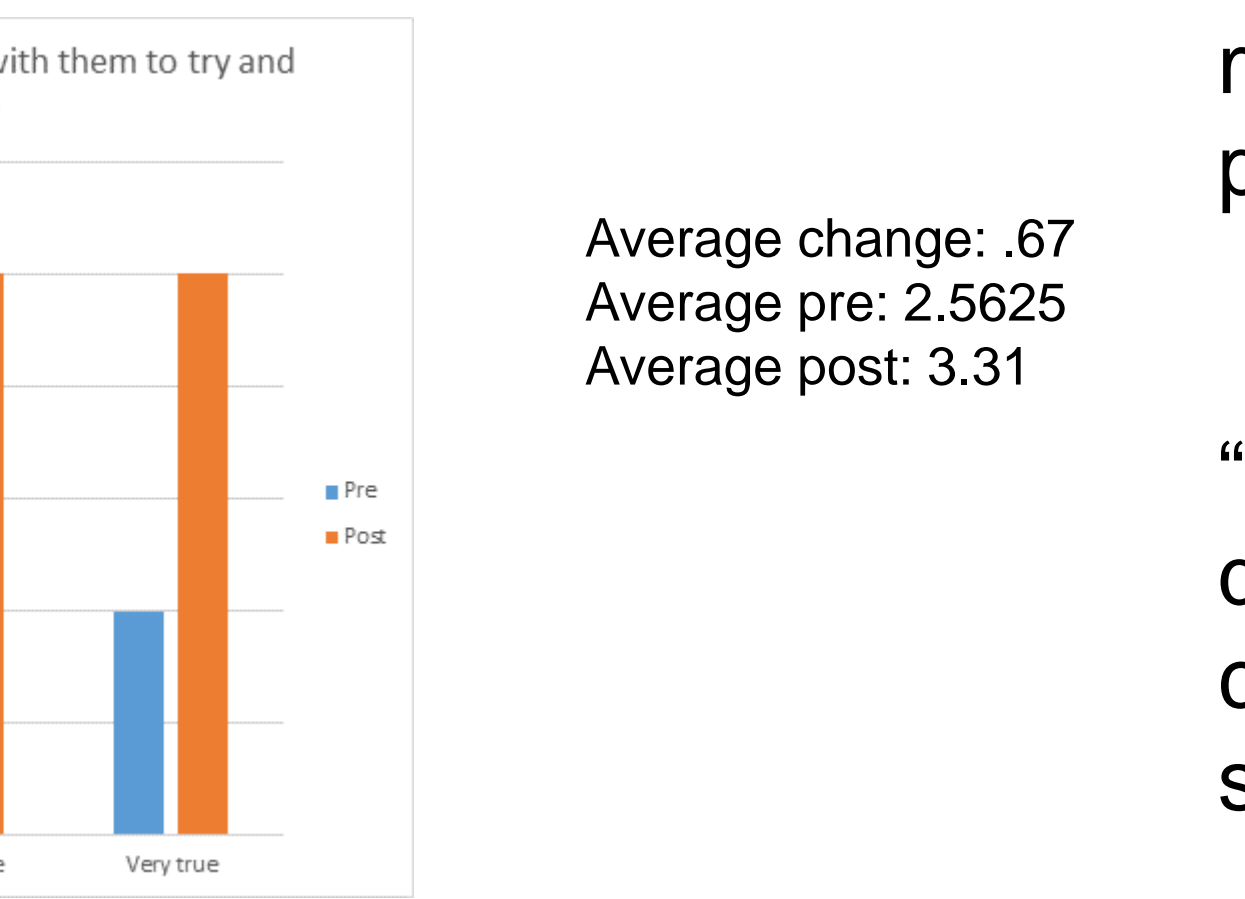


The Early Findings

How do students say they have changed?



Average change: .92
Average pre: 2.83
Average post: 3.75



Average change: .67
Average pre: 2.5625
Average post: 3.31

"I react to it with more compassion. I've come to understand that difficult conversations are not just a selfish act of needing to say what I have to say but involve two people and I now make room for the other party to respond"

"Now my instinct is to ask questions before making conclusive or labelling statements."

What activities helped?

"I enjoyed hearing other people's experiences with difficult conversations as it allowed me to see various communication styles. I also really enjoyed the concreteness and clarity of the 6 A model".

"When the fourth year students came I really enjoyed that, and it was effective. I think because peer to peer learning is something that I can engage with, with more ease... I also like the 6A's small card handout it was cute, and helpful!"

"Even if it wasn't my issue we were talking about, classmates had very unique and effective methods of handling situations that I never would have thought of".

Acknowledgements

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