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Using dreams to train the reflective practitioner: the Ullman dream group in social work education

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Reflective practice does not need to be and cannot be taught, but is an innate capability inherent in us all. It involves an intuitive sensitivity which the creative unconscious can attain to infinitely better than the conscious deliberative mind. Working with dreams using the Ullman experiential dream group is a method of choice to acquaint students and teachers with their inner reflective resources and train them to move aside learned misconceptions long enough for new, more accurate ways of defining and approaching opportunities to make themselves felt. The Ullman method is neither psychotherapy nor counseling and requires no expertise in psychology or dream theory. It is very effective in the classroom and safe for use by teachers and students. Employing a sample classroom dream, this paper illustrates how the Ullman dream group works to draw from within the student changes of attitude that lead to creative renewal and enhanced professional artistry.

Keywords: reflective practice; social work education; social work curriculum; Taiwan; Montague Ullman experiential dream group; dreams; Taiwan aborigine

Introduction

Schön (1982, 1987) studied professionals in various fields who went about their work in a uniquely intuitive, spontaneous and uncannily appropriate manner that yielded superior results. He termed this way of working ‘reflective practice’. Since Schön’s time a good deal of effort has gone into finding ways to teach reflective skills to young professionals. Surprisingly, it does not seem to have occurred to anyone that it is not something that needs to be taught to a species that is the product of millions of years of primate evolution, but rather is an innate trait and way of operating that even long years of modern professional training cannot completely obliterate in every single student. There are always those rare people who still manage to emerge with the connection to their inner reflective resources relatively intact and become what Schön termed ‘reflective practitioners’.

From some 25 years of working with dreams, I have observed that everyone has deep within them ‘an inner reflective core’. Montague Ullman, who originated the experiential dream group process, was the first to observe this, only he called it ‘an incorruptible core of being’ (Ullman 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979). It is the deepest part of us that formal education does not get to and cannot damage. We ourselves cannot get to it; however, it is what enables us to get to everything else – including our highest creative breakthroughs, spiritual intuitions and scientific

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insights. All true education, in its original sense of ‘Know Thyself’, is an attempt to acquaint the student with this inner reflective capability; and all great teachers somehow have an ability to accomplish this – such that the student learns from them not this or that, but how to approach the shifting complexities of situations that are new, unknown or unique.

Except for rare exceptions among us, what arises from this deeply unconscious ‘reflective core’ to deal with these types of situations cannot so easily get through all our acquired concepts. But the moment we go to sleep and dream, it freely expresses itself. Not surprisingly, it does this in the language of the creative artist, the religious prophet and the genius physicist – the visual poetry of metaphorical imagery. Therefore, most of us wake up from a dream with no idea that we have been given a precious insight from our inner reflective core.

No matter how one defines reflective practice, it involves intuitive sensitivity. The creative unconscious does this infinitely better than the conscious deliberative mind (Arieti, 1976; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Ghiselin, 1952; May, 1975; Neumann, 1959; Storr, 1993). Any training that puts the student closer to their own unconscious creative intuitions – that teaches them the value of moving aside their acquired misconceptions long enough for that ‘small inner voice’ to get through and register – will return them to their inborn genius for reflective practice.

That dreams are the ‘royal road’ to the intuitive, spontaneous aspects of cognition, was discovered by Freud over a century ago (Freud & Strachey, 1965). But Freud’s ‘subconscious’ is a garbage bin for forbidden thoughts and improper impulses – hardly an appealing place to go poking around for reflective traits. C.G. Jung (Jung, Adler & Hull, 1956, 1969, 1974) re-envisioned it as the ‘unconscious’ – not just a repository for all that is socially unacceptable, inferior and beneath us, but also for what is most transcendentally beautiful, sublime, and above or beyond us, including art, creativity, religious realization and scientific genius. Reflective traits fit right in here. Why, then, are dreams not widely used to train reflective practitioners? The reason is that both Freudian and Jungian ways of interpreting dreams involve long periods of individual ‘therapy’, conducted by pricey ‘experts’ – the products of lengthy and expensive training in the safe administration of psychological theory. An ordinary teacher, or professional in a field outside psychology, is not competent to use such methods to work with the dreams of students in a classroom and, very probably if she tried, would harm the student.

All this changed about the time Schön was doing his work with reflective practitioners. The American psychiatrist Montague Ullman, in Sweden training young medical interns how to work with dreams, decided to use the student’s own dreams to teach them, and thus originated the experiential dream group process. This way of working with dreams is not therapy and not counseling. It is not theory-based and so does not require expertise in psychology. In fact, its premise is that no outside expert can know better than the dreamer herself what her dream means. Moreover, the method is not dangerous for a teacher to use, a professional in any field, or a layperson. The dreamer herself controls the process and can stop it the moment she feels threatened. In addition to all this, it is fun and students love it.

Although Schön and Ullman never met or had occasion to learn of each other’s work, their endeavors emerged from the same Zeitgeist that had already produced Abraham H. Maslow, and the work of these three men all address the issue of quality. Maslow (1968, 1970, 1971) studied quality individuals, Schön studied quality professional performance, and Ullman used dreams to connect individuals with that deep
inner core of reflection that everybody has but so few ever find, and that accounts for the quality individual as well as the quality professional performance.

Using a sample dream from one of my graduate classes in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at Taiwan’s National Chi Nan University, this paper describes the stages of the Ullman dream group method and suggests its rich potential as a method to train the reflective practitioner.

**Method, results and discussion**

**Getting started: the professor disappears**

As dream group leader I know no more about the dream or the dreamer than any of the students, and I do not control the process. The dreamer does. Because the dreamer is in control, the method is safe for classroom use. Because the authority in the group is not the leader but the dream, the method is valuable for classroom use. It affords the students rare access to a resource within themselves that can inform them in a way no outside authority ever possibly could.

**Stage Ia: the leader calls for a dream**

We sit in a circle. I open the dream group by asking, ‘Is there anyone who has a dream they’d like to share today’.

As leader, I cannot, and neither can anyone else, point a finger at a specific person and say, ‘You haven’t shared a dream yet. Why don’t you tell us your dream today?’ Offering a dream is purely voluntary.

‘I have a dream’, one of the students speaks up eventually. Halfway through one semester the student who spoke these words was a young lady who, for purposes of confidentiality, will be called Sho Ting.

‘Tell us your dream slowly, so we can all write it down’ I instruct Sho Ting, ‘Just the dream, nothing else’. At this stage we do not want the dreamer’s associations or interpretations. It is important we stay ignorant of those for the moment.

Sho Ting told us her dream: [For clarity, I have corrected her English throughout]:

I went to one of the departments in my institution, and met a co-worker. She asked me something about a project that will be conducted in August. I told her my suggestion and idea. Then I said, “Why do you ask? You will be quitting next month”. We looked at each other and smiled. Then I woke up.

**Stage Ib: the group questions the dreamer to clarify the dream**

After we all write down the dream, any group member can ask a question about any part of the dream that’s unclear.

‘Can you say anything more about your feelings in the dream?’ is a question that is important to ask at this stage.

Another is the question I asked, ‘Is any person or any place in the dream a real-life person or place?’

‘The co-worker in the dream really is my co-worker and best friend at work’, Sho Ting replied. ‘She is smart, logical, and a person of integrity’.

Then she added, ‘The project is also a real project at the social work institution where I work and it actually is going to take place in August’.
‘And, that co-worker really is quitting next month’, she said.

Then she thought a moment, and said, ‘The whole conversation is real. The exact same conversation took place between me and her before I dreamed it’.

‘Everything in the dream is real’, she said. ‘It all actually happened’.

In the 25 years that I had worked with dreams this was the first time I had ever encountered this. It is not the way dreams work.

‘Look at your dream again’, I said. ‘Can you find any ways at all that the dream differs, even a tiny bit, from the episode that happened in real life?’

Sho Ting was intrigued by this question. She fell into thought for a moment, and then said:

Three places:
1. In real life our conversation was by phone. In the dream we are face to face.
2. In real life usually there are other people in the office. In the dream it’s just the two of us.
3. In real life the phone conversation took place while I was in my Pingtung office. In the dream it took place in the Kaohsiung office, which is the office where my friend works. [For purposes of confidentiality the names of the cities have been changed].

Now we had the full dream, we could begin.

Stage IIa: group members express what they would feel in the dream if it were their own

‘Sit back, listen, and take any notes you need to’, I instructed Sho Ting. To the group I said, ‘Pretend it’s your dream and see what feelings you can find in it. Speak to each other. Don’t address the dreamer’.

Members of the group, one after another in rapid succession, burst out with a cascade of different feelings that Sho Ting’s dream would have for them if it were theirs. For example, one group member said, ‘I’m happy that my co-worker turns to me with her questions. It makes me feel she values my opinion’. Another said, ‘I’m sad she’ll be quitting next month because she is my friend’.

Stage IIb: group members express what the meaning of individual metaphors in the dream would be if it were their own dream

I invite the group to address the images of the dream as metaphors. Someone said, ‘I feel the co-worker in my dream is a metaphor for another aspect of myself’.

After this stage had gone on for a while, I turned to Sho Ting and said:

We’ve all been saying all kinds of things about you and your dream; but we don’t know anything about you or your dream. You do, though. And so now it’s your turn to respond to what you have heard, share any ideas you have yourself about what the dream means, why you had it on this particular night, or anything else at all that you care to say. You can fall silent and think. Nobody will interrupt you. All you have to do is tell us when you’re finished.

Stage IIIa: the dreamer responds and tells what she now thinks her dream means

Sho Ting’s response was disappointingly brief:
I’ve worked in my institution almost six years. The friend in the dream has been my co-
worker for about three. She really trusts me and asks me about problems that arise in her 
work. She and I can talk about our work, our personal life, anything. She’s been a good 
worker and a good friend to me. I don’t like to see her quit. That she’s quitting makes 
me feel sad, unhappy, and lonely.

I don’t want to give her up. But she is really happy to leave. I understand but I feel sad, 
and a little bit angry at myself because I have not also quit, I am staying at the institution.

‘That’s all’, Sho Ting said. She fell silent.

‘It seems to me that you already knew all that before the dream’, I ventured. ‘A 
dream always brings information that we do not yet know. If you would care to go 
forward to the next stage of the process, where we set the dream aside and look at what 
was happening in your life at the time prior to the dream, we might discover what 
more this dream has to tell you.’

‘Would you like to do that?’ I asked.

‘Yes’, she said.

**Stage IIIb: the group and the dreamer engage in a dialog**

1. **Looking into the period of the dreamer’s life just before the dream**

‘We’ve looked at the dream’, I said to Sho Ting. ‘In this stage we set the dream aside, 
and forget about it for the moment. We want to look now at the period of your life just 
before you had the dream’.

At each new stage of the process the leader needs to keep the dreamer and the 
group oriented as to where in the process they are.

‘When we lie down to sleep we often have thoughts running through our mind’, I 
said. ‘As we slip down into sleep these thoughts become pictures, and the pictures 
organize themselves, through the course of the night, into dreams. For this reason the 
way we always begin looking into the real life context that gives rise to a dream is to 
ask if you care to say anything about the thoughts going through your mind as you lay 
down to sleep the night before’.

‘Before going to sleep I lay in bed thinking about my job’, Sho Ting said. ‘The 
government allotted me a car when I first came to the institution. Now 6 years later, 
I’m told I have to give the car back. I don’t want to let the car go. I’m attached to the 
car. It was my first car’.

From that point, I move the questions gradually back in time, starting out with the 
evening. The purpose of this stage is not to dig information out from the dreamer in 
an intrusive way. In fact, we forbid information-demanding questions. (e.g. ‘Did you 
see a movie before you went to bed?’). Rather, the purpose is to allow the dreamer the 
opportunity to look into her life prior to the dream and see what she can discover. The 
type of questions permitted are information-eliciting questions. ‘Would you care to 
say anything about what you did before going to bed?’ I asked.

‘That evening I got an e-mail from my boss saying I have to give the car back’, 
Sho Ting said. ‘I was thinking about my job and wondering why I’m staying’.

‘Would you care to say anything more about that?’ I asked. This general fishing 
question is the most useful question of all in the dream group. It follows the direction 
the dreamer herself is headed in and invites her to carry us further along in that direction 
if she cares to.
‘One of the reasons I’ve stayed is to fight the unfair policies at my institution’ Sho Ting said. ‘So many of the policies are unfair. I don’t like unfairness. When I find something I think is unfair I tell my boss. She doesn’t always listen. I don’t think it’s right that these unfair policies continue. But sometimes I just get too tired of trying to convince my boss we should fight these polices, and I just want to quit. This has been going on for 6 years. I never really leave’.

I continue carrying the questions back in time to the whole day, the preceding few days, or even ‘this whole phase of your life’. Not just the leader, but any group member can ask questions during this phase. However, the leader needs to be on guard and stop anyone from asking the dreamer leading questions, which are not authentic questions, but backhanded ploys to foist an hypothesis on the dreamer. Leading questions are really information-providing questions. They tell the dreamer some idea that the group member has come up with and wants the dreamer to verify. Such questions poison the process by taking the direction of inquiry away from the dreamer. Students quickly come to see this. They strive to avoid them and to ask the dreamer questions that free her to lead us in the direction she wishes. For example, someone asked, ‘Would you care to say more about your co-worker?’

‘My friend said she’s quitting because the struggle has exhausted her in body and mind’, Sho Ting said. ‘But when she quits I will lose the only partner I have to fight the institution. Maybe I will go on fighting by myself. No one else will be on my side. I feel lonely and powerless’.

The next logical question was, ‘Would you care to say anything more about fighting the institution?’ We’re just following where Sho Ting is leading us, inviting her to go further.

‘There are so many unfair things going on at our institution’, Sho Ting said. ‘For this project, for example, we’ve applied for government money for the children’s department but we are actually using this grant to train our personnel about a gender issue. So the expense report we are writing up is not real. It doesn’t correspond to what we are actually doing’.

There was real feeling in her voice when she said that, so I asked the general fishing question again, ‘Would you care to say anything more about that?’

‘I think we are liars’, she said. ‘I don’t like doing something like this, but we have to do it. The report we’re making to the government as well as the expense report are fictions’.

One mistake an inexperienced leader will make is to spend too much time looking into the life of the dreamer in order to find the exact triggers for the dream. It is the subsequent phase that is the most important part of the Ullman process and the leader needs to control the timing of the stages in order to allow a sufficient amount of time for it. ‘Would you like to go on to the ‘Playback’ stage of the process?’ I asked Sho Ting.

‘Yes,’ she said.

(2) The ‘Playback’: a segment at a time, a group member reads the dream back to the dreamer. The dreamer responds freely. Members of the group ask questions

A group member read the first part of Sho Ting’s dream back to her. This is done in second-person, in order to make it more immediate, and put Sho Ting back in the scene again. ‘You went to one of the department in your institution, and met a co-worker’.

Sho Ting sat there and said nothing, as if there were nothing more to say.
‘That evening you got an e-mail from your boss telling you that you had to give the car back’ I reminded her. ‘Then as you lay down to sleep you were thinking about how you didn’t want to give the car back’.

Sho Ting said nothing.

‘But when you went to sleep and had a dream’, I continued, ‘you didn’t dream about the car at all, or about your boss – you dreamed about your co-worker’. It was not a question. I did not need to ask a question, only pose the apparent discrepancy between what was on her mind before she went to sleep and what she dreamed. That was enough to make the pieces fall together for Sho Ting.

‘The person I care about and the car I care about are both leaving me’, she said. ‘I can’t do anything about it. I’m sad and I’m angry but I can’t do anything. I have so many memories with both. To lose them is like losing a part of myself’.

It didn’t seem she was finished. I waited in silence.

‘When I started working at the institution I drove around in the car with my head filled with a vision of what I wanted to accomplish as a social worker’, she went on after a moment. ‘I think the car is very tied up with the vision I had about this job. So when the government now wants the car back I feel a bigger loss than just the car’.

She immediately added, ‘And my co-worker is a good partner with me in fighting the institution’s policy. Her quitting is a similar loss. Losing her and losing the car make me feel empty, powerless’.

Before she went to sleep that night she was thinking of the car she has to give up and after going to sleep she had a dream of the co-worker who is leaving. The two images, she is telling us, are interchangeable. Each represents to her that part of herself that she feels she is losing. The dream is about losing a part of herself.

The group member read the next segment of the dream back to her: ‘She asked you something about a project that will be conducted in August. You told her your suggestion and idea’.

Sho Ting was silent.

I was silent. There was something to be said here. I think by now she had the process down. I did not need to keep prompting her. I waited. My silence spoke louder than any question I could have asked.

‘The idea I told her when she called me with her question was a good idea, but it really wasn’t so good a thing to do’, Sho Ting said. ‘The way I suggested she wangle the expense report was an easy way to get around her problem, but it was not a good way. It was not the right way’.

A moment later she added, ‘When I was on the phone with her I had no special feeling about doing this. But after hanging up I felt angry with myself’.

Feeling she was going to say more, I waited.

‘I don’t like to be a liar, but I am’, she said. ‘And I’m angry with myself for this’.

The group member read the concluding segment of the dream back to her: ‘Then you said, ‘Why do you ask? You will be quitting next month’. The two of you looked at each other and smiled. Then you woke up’.

‘I’m angry with myself because why should I have to depend on others to keep up my passion and to keep alive the vision I had when I first got this job’, Sho Ting said immediately.

A moment later she added, ‘I think I’m just like a child in that I have to depend on someone else’.

She was going to say something more, so we waited. ‘But I know I am not a child. I can do anything I want by myself’, she said.
A moment later she expressed the opposite feeling. ‘I don’t like the feeling I have about myself. I don’t want to be like a child but actually I am. Really I can’t do anything by myself. I need a partner’.

‘I don’t want to be alone’. Sho Ting stopped speaking. The tears flowed.

A moment before Sho Ting had been telling us about her job. Now she was talking about herself, who she was. A deeper level of the dream had slipped in here.

Sho Ting was still crying. Around the circle came the box of tissues. We waited. Sho Ting had more to say. Everybody sensed this and kept quiet.

When she’d regained her composure, she continued. ‘I have gotten new information from this dream – I am still afraid of being lonely’.

She fell silent again. The pause was longer. The tears came again. The group waited in silence. When she could speak again, Sho Ting continued. ‘I was an only child. I had no one to play with me. I did almost everything by myself, even my homework. It was boring’.

She paused, then continued. ‘I never liked being alone all the time. I always thought when I grow up I can be alone’.

Then she said, ‘But actually I still don’t like to be alone’.

She fell silent. Then out of the blue she said, ‘The vision I had about my job was that I might really play a role in bringing about social justice’.

She was slipping to some deeper level still. She clamped up and became silent.

‘Would you care to say more about social justice?’ was the obvious question to ask. I asked it.

‘Social justice means no discrimination, no oppression’, she replied immediately. I did not see where she was headed. Once more she fell silent. I did the only thing I could do. I waited. This was the first time she had mentioned oppression or discrimination. I did not know where it fitted in.

‘I’m aboriginal’, she said.

She was a member of one of the native tribes of Austronesian peoples that originally inhabited Taiwan and still survive in tiny pockets here and there in remote mountain locations. Only now I noticed her skin color was browner than her classmates and her eyes were different.

‘I grew up in the city’, Sho Ting explained. ‘I never had many friends’. The remnant of her tribe was somewhere up in the mountains but her parents had gone down into the city to get jobs. She was an only child, isolated, one of a kind – never seen for who she was, but treated by peers, and teachers alike, as a stereotype.

Then, with great feeling now, she stated adamantly, ‘Many people want to tell me who I am. But that’s their imagination. They don’t really understand who I am’.

Her final words were likewise emphatic and filled with passion. ‘I want to tell everybody, everybody is unique. Don’t impose any ideas on that people’.

There is a feeling, always, at the end of a good piece of dream work – and everyone in the room feels it – that we have somehow been made more human, all of us, because of the voyage we have been taken along on, down into the hidden recesses of a human heart.

(3) ‘Orchestration’: each member of the group can tell the dreamer what she feels the dream is saying

I asked Sho Ting if she wished to go on to the next stage and hear the ideas others in the group had about her dream.
‘Yes,’ she said.

Every member of the group had something fascinating and interesting to say. This phase of the process is like the group of blind men feeling the elephant. Each has a different take, depending what part of the animal they touch. But taken together, the collective picture is amazingly accurate.

What came out was that, in the view of the group, this dream was not just about her one co-worker who had integrity and was quitting. It was about her own integrity, which is why the dream presented a different picture than the real life event — and put her (1) in the office alone with the co-worker because at this critical point in her life that one individual represented the only power she had (her own integrity) to get her through what was really for her a life crisis; (2) in her co-worker’s office and not her own because her integrity was in the same position as her friend, on the point of leaving her, as just to get by, day in and day out, she became more and more adept at the corrupt practices of the workplace, and (3) face to face with that friend rather than talking to her over the phone because this was an issue she really did need to face at this point. She could lose her friend, she could lose that car, but she could not afford to lose her own integrity by letting herself get corrupted at her workplace by expedient acts of untruthfulness such as the funding idea she came up with for her friend prior to the dream, for her integrity is the root of her power as a human being, as a member of Taiwan’s aboriginal minority, and as a passionate and committed social worker.

(4) The dreamer has the last word

When the last group member had finished her orchestration, I told Sho Ting that in the Ullman group, we always give the dreamer the last word. I asked her if she had anything she wished to say.

‘So many feelings’, was all she said. She indicated that maybe she would tell us more in a subsequent class when she had time to think about it all.

Stage IV: at a subsequent meeting dreamer presents additional ideas

Two weeks later Sho Ting spoke up. ‘I think the dream showed me my power is my anger’, was all she said. I had noticed how many times she had mentioned anger during the course of her work with the dream. I went back through my notes afterwards and enumerated every feeling she had mentioned and how many times she mentioned it. It surprised me to find that anger did not tower above all the other emotions. The feeling of being lonely and the feeling of suffering a loss were up there with it. Almost as frequently she had mentioned feelings of passion for her work, feelings that she had compromised these passions, feelings of powerlessness and feelings of unfairness. The emotional map this dream presented was too complicated to be understood in terms of anger alone. Accordingly, during the following week I went back to my notes and looked again at everything Sho Ting said to see if there was not a deeper way to view this dream.

Sho Ting’s anger might make sense in terms of a workplace environment that drove away her only friend; and it might make sense in terms of the new ruling that deprived her of the car she had been given to do her job. But anger hardly suffices to explain the whole captivating picture of the marvelously principled aboriginal child who grew up without friends and misunderstood by her Chinese peers – yet prevailed in her integrity and came into adulthood with a passion to make the world a better
place for others suffering from injustice and unfairness. To look at that little girl, or at Sho Ting, the graduate student in the dream class, as a ‘deprived’ individual misses the biggest part of who she is, the part that so touched my heart, and the heart, I think, of everyone in the class.

In the same way that a beam of white light splits into its component colors when it impacts a prism, so the unconscious wholeness that is every human’s birthright routinely gets dichotomized by the rational intellect into opposites such as ‘deprived’ and ‘advantaged’. What goes missing when this happens is the unbroken integrity of the unconscious, that wholeness in which the opposites are one and the same, and function in the fullness of their power.

For Sho Ting to have been deprived in the way she was is to be given an advantage; for she has that which cannot be taught or acquired in any other way – a deep and authentic passion for fairness and social justice. In this, not in anger, lay her real power as a social worker and her ability to make a difference. An inferior understanding enters into everything the deprived Sho Ting does. Her attempts to help may cause harm. Only in a Sho Ting rooted in the whole of herself will the creative unconscious be fully empowered, making her capable of working from her advantaged, spontaneous and intuitive aspect.

A few weeks later Sho Ting turned in a single typed page describing what she got from work with her dream. This was the final paragraph:

I no longer feel only my injury. But I feel closer to my whole self. I am very happy to discover all that I am. My deficient background actually gave me a blessing. I no longer want to see it just as a problem to be gotten rid of. For if I did that I think I would lose my true self, the real me.

She had reached the understanding herself.

In the very last class she reported that she at last had a frank talk with her supervisor and that her supervisor listened and was impressed by what she had to say; and that changes were to take place in the way things are done at her institution.

**Conclusion**

The Ullman experiential dream group is a powerful tool in reflective practice for it acquaints professionals and students with their inner reflective core. It belongs in the professional curriculum and workplace.

**Notes on contributor**

Bill Stimson first developed the Montague Ullman experiential dream group into a university course at Taiwan’s National Yang-Ming Medical College. He subsequently developed it further with Shuyuan Wang in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at Taiwan’s National Chi Nan University. He leads free ongoing Ullman dream groups for the campus community at Chi Nan University and for the general public in Taipei and Taichung.

**References**


