



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Reflections on a journey to knowing self

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Submitted for publication: 28th March 2011

Accepted for publication: 9th May 2011

Keywords: inner journey, reflection, critical companionship, personal and professional growth, transformational change, knowing self

Introduction

I've been on a journey these past two years; an inner journey—one that has opened me up to better understanding myself and how I react and respond to others, in my personal and professional relationships. This article is an evaluation of the role that structured reflection and critical companionship have played in guiding me on this journey.

Critical reflection

On 2 March 2009, I made my first ever journal entry; something that I had been encouraged to do as part of my ongoing professional development and a requirement for me to complete my Pastoral Counselling Diploma. I had read that journaling would help me keep a record of questions, ideas, insights and lessons learned in uncovering patterns and issues in my work and everyday experiences. Having never journalled before, I was open to the possibility it offered me, in terms of my personal and professional growth.

In the four months leading up to this, I had also been introduced to the concept of structured reflection as a tool to be used as part of a three-year, research-based, Practice Development (PD) Programme within my organisation; the South Eastern Region of UnitingCare Ageing, a missional arm of the Uniting Church in Australia, which serves the needs of the frail aged in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.

I completed my first reflection on practice on 27 March 2009. Almost immediately I could see how a structured model of reflection would help me clarify the more random patterns of thought expressed in my journal entries and I began to regularly integrate the two techniques; a practice that I continue to use.

The experience of practice development over the past two years, has helped me realise how fundamentally important the discipline of structured reflection is; not only for personal and professional growth, but also to the success or otherwise of any practice development programme, in facilitating

transformational change in the workplace. In the process, I have become a more capable practice developer; able to contribute to this change-process with confidence and conviction.

Pelling, Bowers and Armstrong (2007, p. 6) write: 'Journaling is ... a metaphor for safely containing our issues in places that can assist us to gently hold parts of our lives that need attention.' Whilst being able to safely contain our issues is important, I soon learnt the value of reflecting on the things that 'need attention' in ways that lead to a better understanding of self and others. Two things helped me in this; firstly, sharing my journal entries with a professional supervisor; and secondly, submitting regular structured reflections to our practice development team leader, for intentional written feedback. I continue to do both these things and have noted with interest how the latter has informed my journaling, making it more purposeful and productive. Whilst I still appreciate random, free-flowing journal writing, framed reflections have helped me focus my attention on every-day experiences in greater depth, allowing me to explore these events with more objective curiosity, as a springboard for growth.

Bringing a reflection technique into my journaling was a conscious effort on my part, to turn around my tendency to be introspective, self-absorbed and overly self-critical. However, trawling through a personal issue that I perhaps would not otherwise have looked too closely at was one thing; knowing how to process this in a meaningful way was another. Only with time and application have I come to understand how to do this and to better understand the potential structured reflection has in helping to fulfil one of the fundamental prerequisites of the Person-Centred Practice Framework, 'Knowing Self.' (McCormack and McCance, 2006; 2010)

The catalyst for me to become more intentional about critical reflection came out of a comment from my supervisor, after sharing one of my early journal entries with her. The suggestion that 'Philip is very hard on Philip,' together with her supportive follow-up, was enough to prompt me to think about taking a more positive and productive approach to self-reflection.

At this early stage, I didn't fully realise that my supervisor's comment went hand-in-glove with two other fundamental characteristics of emancipatory practice development; critical companionship (Titchen, 2000) and the principle of high challenge/high support (Johns and McCormack, 1998). With the benefit of hindsight I also realise how taking this approach also fitted so well with the principle of celebrating the things we do well and seeking out areas of potential improvement.

My supervisor had planted the seed of enlightenment that would ultimately bring me to a fuller understanding of the more positive dictionary definitions of what it is to be 'critical'; namely: "*Occupied with or skilled in criticism ... Involving skilful judgement as to truth, merit etc;*" (The Macquarie Concise Dictionary, 1988, p. 221) Over time, this seed would be nourished through intentional feedback on my reflections from our practice development team leader, leading me to greatly appreciate her adopted role of 'critical companion' as one in which she offered me both challenge and support, in a way that facilitated my personal growth and transformation.

Titchen's (2004, p. 149) description of critical companionship as: 'a helping relationship in which one person accompanies another on an experiential learning journey' has proved to be very real for me. Sharing my reflections with a skilled facilitator has opened me up to new insights into the way I and those I work with behave, particularly in challenging situations. An early example of this relates to consistent negative feedback given at our regular team meetings, by one person who felt excluded from involvement in our newly implemented practice development programme. Reflecting on this, with the

help of enabling questions from my team leader, turned a potential source of frustration into an opportunity to work with the team member at a deeper level, uncovering other issues which were feeding her perception of exclusion.

From the outset, feedback on reflections sent to my team leader proved to be both informative and thought-provoking; but more importantly they were, and still are, a call to action. Brown and McCormack (2009, p. 3) describe facilitated reflective sessions as 'psychologically safe places' that support practitioners to develop effective person-centred practices. This was certainly my experience. It was liberating to be able to safely share my thoughts and feelings about events that may have remained unresolved sources of frustration; a process which offered me both clarity and wisdom in better understanding myself and others, through the power of disarmingly simple questions and statements, such as:

- 'Did you realise this was happening?'
- 'You could note the way this person intervened ... be observant. Do they always intervene in this way?'
- 'How can you work with this person to enable them to increase their awareness?'
- 'This is why using a method such as claims, concerns and issues helps to achieve more balance.'
- 'Where does your need to 'jump in' come from and what situations trigger it?'
- 'How do you attend to your own resilience, Philip?'

Sensitive, challenging feedback like this began to help me to look at everyday events in the workplace with more discernment and depth. Trust in the integrity of the observations and comments made by my critical companion enabled me to see things from a different perspective and breathed life into the theories and principles of practice development; particularly, the comment regarding my tendency to 'jump in' and offer solutions to people. This resonated with a ministry goal that I had set myself at the beginning of 2009—namely, to disarm my tendency to be 'Mr Fixit' by offering solutions and giving advice in pastoral conversations, rather than employing enabling interventions which empowered people to make changes in their lives.

However, encouragement to see things in a different light was only the beginning of the process. In terms of the emancipatory practice development processes of 'enlightenment, empowerment and emancipation', I was very much at step one. Only by tapping into the potential power of the feedback I was receiving would I be able to see the everyday challenges and frustrations of ministry as opportunities for productive change.

An active response was called for on my part, to make this a lived experience. My theoretical understanding of the principles of practice development needed to be tested and, over time, I began to realise how this process worked—sometimes, finding it necessary to re-visit some situations more than once, before I began to see a way forward. Although I saw this as a natural part of the action-reflection cycle, fitting Kolb's (1995) experiential learning model, it was not without frustrations at times. Importantly, the concept of high challenge/high support became more and more real to me each time I put my reflected learning into practice, with critical guidance from our team leader.

I admit that it takes discipline to stay engaged in the process, particularly in our time-hungry workplaces, where we look for 'quick-fix' solutions to often complex challenges. But, each time I revisit the reflection process or follow through on the feedback I receive, I find I become more empowered to try a different

approach. As I do this, I grow a little in knowledge, capability and the realisation that tenacity is very much a pre-requisite for any practice developer.

Being encouraged to move from using a simple '15 Minute Critical Reflection Tool' to Mezirow's Reflection Foci, (Mezirow, 1981) during the first year of our practice development programme, added to the depth of my learning, taking me deeper into the reflective process. Mezirow (1991) urges us to reflect on the assumptions and pre-conceived notions we have about ourselves and our actions as a way into what he describes as 'transformative learning.' Describing this in more detail, Mezirow (1991, p. 14) says:

'Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings.'

Understanding this opened me up to exercising more discernment in my reflections, in a way that was particularly helpful in focusing on another of the McCormack and McCance Person-Centred Practice Framework pre-requisites, 'Clarity of Beliefs and Values.'

Examining the value judgements I make in my reflections and mirroring them against our organisational values has been invaluable; not only in testing my own beliefs and assumptions but also in making the corporate 'Value Statements' more relevant and meaningful, giving me further insight into assessing whether my thoughts and behaviour are congruent with my faith and the culture of the organisation I work for.

A measure of the effectiveness of this intuitive process is shown in this extract from a reflection I completed towards the end my first year as a practice development facilitator, using Mezirow's Reflection Foci:

Did I check out my values? I perhaps did this instinctively as I listened to what was being said. It was almost as if there were two conversations going on at the same time; the one coming from the group and the other one inside my head, discerning the most appropriate way to respond.
Feedback from team leader: This is the voice of reflection –in –action (Schön) or your internal supervisor (casement) and is positive.

This extract, and the comment from my team leader, is also a good example of how informed feedback has helped me with my theoretical reflectivity; broadening my understanding of how theory informs every-day thinking and practice. More than that, it resonates with this observation from Brown and McCormack (2009, p. 13):

'Practitioners need to listen to themselves and others, so as to develop an understanding of their practice ... through critical reflection, reflexivity and dialogue. Reflexivity can be defined as having an ongoing conversation about an experience while simultaneously living in the moment ... To be reflexive, people have to stand back from values and belief systems, habitual ways of being, structures of understanding themselves, and their relationship with the world. This requires generating an awareness of the way they are perceived and experienced by others, and being able to change deep held ways of being.'

Through ongoing reflective practice, I am learning how to more effectively listen to that inner conversation while 'living in the moment.' I am also learning to stand back from my role as a chaplain and take on board observation from team members; for example, that in my dealings with others I have a tendency to be 'too pastoral' at times. Although my attempts to respond to this challenge have been encouraged and supported by those I work with, my ability to offer feedback in an appropriate and facilitating way is something I still need to develop more effectively, without compromising my core values and beliefs; ensuring that the values I live by facilitate positive, productive relationships in my work-a-day context.

This enhanced self-awareness has been a fundamental characteristic of my reflective journey. And, as I continue to look at my reflective practice through the prism of the Person-Centred Practice Framework (McCormack and McCance 2006; 2010), I also see how valuable this has been in developing my interpersonal and professional skills; to the point that I now find that I am more able to be a 'critical companion' to others. In developing these skills, I am striving towards transformational leadership—described by Barling et al (2000, p) (cited by Solman and Fitzgerald, 2008, p. 261) as one is 'able to influence others towards an ideal.'

Regular reflection continues to be the method that I use to help me become a role model to others, influencing them to embrace what Solman and Fitzgerald (2008, p. 262) characterise as a 'commitment to shared understanding of workplace expectations, goals and objectives.'

Dewing (2008, p. 273) describes 'Active Learning' as a process of learning that 'draws on, creatively synthesises and integrates numerous learning methods' which come out of personal experiences in our work-a-day lives. Further to this, Dewing suggests that it is necessary to be open to this process by 'engaging with and learning from personal experience' in order for emancipatory and transformational change to become a lived experience. For me, structured reflection and critical companionship have proved to be fundamental to the process of learning from my daily experiences; equipping me in my journey towards seeing McCormack and McCance's (2006) 'prerequisites' of a practice developer being fulfilled in my ministry, particular that of 'Knowing Self.' In working toward this goal, I feel that I will better understand others and be more equipped to play my part in bringing about sustainable change in my workplace.

In summary, my journey to knowing self is ongoing; but most significantly, I have come to realise that critical companionship is something my team leader offered me along the way. Now, it's for me to more fully understand the model and internalise it for myself, in order to become more self-sustaining in my own reflective growth and to be able to use critical companionship effectively, when I support and challenge others.

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