With Within and Between - Creating a learning-in-practice community in multi-disciplinary contexts

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"*The practicum is a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures, distractions and risks of the real one, to which nevertheless, it refers. It stands in an intermediate space between the practice world, the "lay" world of ordinary life and the esoteric world of the academy".*

Schon D. (1987) Educating the Reflective Practitioner p.37

Creating a context for the story

We have been teaching multi disciplinary groups for nearly 10 years now as part of our systemic psychotherapy training courses. Whilst we take this as a "norm" for our constituency or emerging community of practice, we have written little about this experience, how it develops and demands of our energy or how we ultimately create learning contexts for all of those in collaborative learning, **until now!**

We are both engaged in teaching a variety of courses at The Family Institute from-undergraduate Counselling to the two year clinical MSc training as well contributing to various other courses with the Health Sport and Science Faculty at the University of Glamorgan.

The Family Institute has been providing therapeutic services to the public and teaching out of that experience for nearly 40 years. It has been with the University of Glamorgan since 2000 having previously been part of the large UK charity Barnardos.

The particular course, to which this presentation and paper refers, is commonly known as the Intermediate Level Training [AFT 2008] and is the 2nd year of the four-year

1

Masters training programme in Systemic Psychotherapy. This qualifying level training leads to registration with the UK Council for Psychotherapy and meets European standards for training in our field.

The course was developed by the Family Institute over 20 years ago and has been the benchmark for many such courses throughout the history of teaching and training in the UK as well as being influential across other European countries during the 80's and 90's.

We believe the students who are drawn to study with us do so because of the richness of the experience in family therapy we have as one of the few courses which offer clinical placements within the training itself. Along with this we are interested in the underlying principles and processes in the application of systemic ideas to wide areas of other forms of practice including social work, health services and education.

As a consequence the courses attract students from a wide range of professions e.g. Social Workers, Psychiatric Nurses, Paediatric Nurses, Health Visitors, Clinical, Educational & Counselling Psychologists, Counsellors, GPs Psychiatrists, Psychotherapists (from other modalities), Teachers, Lawyers, Theatre professions etc.

We seek to be open and as inclusive as possible and to enable participants to find connections within a collaborative systemically informed approach to learning and practice.

We have organised this short paper to correspond with our presentation as a way of expanding on the ideas we offer.

A view of approach

Like Schon [1987] who points toward the focus of 'what people do' and 'how they think about and do what they think about and do', we see these as the ideas fuelling our

practice today. We take the position of seeking to understand this within the bigger picture - theirs and ours.

We draw too on the help of many others in developing these ideas such as Gergen & Kaye [1992][2006] and MacNamee, [1992,1988], Friere [1972] and Brooks and Brooks [1993] as well as Mortimore [1999], Bateson [1973] and Brockbank and McGill [1998].

Social constructionist and constructivist approaches offer us glimpses of the complexity of relational thinking developed within temporary frames, and which value experience. In a sense teaching out of this perspective moves towards the teaching relationship having a sense of its own 'systemic mind', Bateson [1973]. These ideas best give us the potential to be useful in generating new meanings about a wide variety of different working contexts and processes in and through which our student colleagues work. The notion of constructing meaning through co- generated conversations has been with us for some time in the therapy field (Anderson and Goulishian [1988], Shotter & Katz [1998] Andersen [1992, 1995]. We see this process as isomorphic with that which takes place within the educational relationship and as such is as valid in our classrooms as our clinical context. Therefore the opportunity for learning to be enhanced through a reflective working of experiences drawn from our students in a 'live' practicum becomes core to the learning process.

Method is co-constructed

As we work within contexts of higher education in Wales we are drawn to some words from the Welsh language that forms part of the sonic landscape. One such word is 'dysgu'. Translated into English means 'learner and teacher' and as such resists the usual dualism and provides a good footing for our thinking and practice as teachers.

Inevitably we are constantly looking for what we refer to as 'contextual markers' in order to generate the most useful information about relationships. These markers indicate a kind of lens through which phenomena can be viewed – these lenses are of course self-reflexive as they include the viewer's view of themselves as part of the picture which is being explored. For this we draw on the work of Cronen & Pearce [2000] Anderson and Goolishian [1988] Von Foester [1990, 1991]. The idea of contextual thinking together with an embodied approach leads to greater integration of ideas, change and learning, particularly that espoused by Bateson [1973, p306] in relation to levels of learning where for those few who achieve level three "Every detail of the universe is seen as proposing a view of the whole".

Equally important, playing with language, in the Wittgenstein sense, is an important consideration when we work with human systems - *"the meaning of a word is its use in language"* Wittgenstein [1958 p.20]. The wide variety of ways where meaning generation indicates power in relationships for the players is core to what needs to be understood and addressed.

Techniques of engagement : the meeting points of interest or difference

The very essence of what we do is best illustrated here with the term 'engagement'. This is a meeting *with* our student colleagues as an authentic exploration of the here and now. How do we encounter the threshold? What rituals might we utilise? What languages do we need to speak? What is it that presents itself as a burning passion, a stuck clinical context or an impasse for practice? The invited focus is on the self of the participant /practitioner and the ongoing creation and recreation our positions alongside the other learners in the context. The differences between teacher and

student are role definitions what is the same is the engagement with one another and the process.

Creating contexts where competent professionals can say "I am stuck, I don't know what to do next" can have a profound impact on others. This is something the experienced professional rarely gets an opportunity to do e.g. when might a lawyer hear about the dilemmas faced by a consultant psychiatrist while simultaneously observing how their colleagues unpack the dilemma and relate to it from several differing perspectives with a view to being able to offer a difference (in view, frame, attitude) which might make a difference. We seek to co-create a context safe enough for the *'within'* to be explored safely.

This multidisciplinary mix allows the practitioners to take further steps. If a sense of a safe, live and robust community is created then knowledge of what might lie between the practicum and the world to which it relates is more easily achieved. New meanings are created moving back and forth between them. Not only does the potential become created for appreciation of that which lies between any or both of those realities (practicum and a particular context) but also more universal process understanding is achieved – learning to learn processes.

The Practicum – a simulation exercise

During one particular study day in a reading seminar with a group of professionals reflecting on their experience of how language defines systems; how feedback influences change in relationships and depends on context, as the teachers we were

particularly interested in trying to find a vehicle where some of what was being described might be experienced 'live' in the here and now – in the room.

So around our coffee table we decided to offer an exercise. We wanted to capture (or at least harness) the energy from the seminar in ways that everyone could take part. The exercise was based around the following processes:

- An invitation is made to the group to divide into groups – participants are encouraged to use the opportunity to explore experience of themselves in a role they might not usually be in:

Team: – 'new team' is tasked with providing therapeutic services to families in their home (discuss formational and operational issues).

Family: – create a scenario that leads to the family referring for therapy.

Consulting team: – the new team will seek your assistance in helping them to consider issues re. the case, multi-disciplinary working, organisational contexts, issues of practice which emerge etc.

Observing group: – observe the process with specific remit of making links between practice, experience, relevant theories and 'universal' or transcendent themes.

It is important in our experience that if at all possible everyone has a job to do in these complex simulation exercises. This ensures everyone is given the platform of a valid contribution to make. It ensures that they become a stakeholder in the success of the learning exercise. It also helps them to have a particular position from which to view what unfolds. Inevitably identification with other players will allow for some manoeuvrability and dialogue with, within and between.

Feedback is noticed live and reflected on through a number of different processes. For example in some situations we will invite the unfolding simulation to be frozen in order

to hear from one or other player about what they are experiencing in the here and now of that moment. This is a meta-communicative reflection – a communication about communication. Feedback processes also include whole reflective chapters in the event.

We are informed in this teaching process by the ideas developed in the use of reflecting team process in family therapy, Andersen [1987,1990, &1992] and the work of Pare & Lysack et al [2006 & 2003].

We teach most often on a full day basis and in this situation were able to give most of the day to building of this exercise – so that each conversational chapter/episode in the event could unfold gradually and not have to be rushed.

We saw the following as the key stages (conversational chapters) in this process.

- Team exploration
- Family Referral
- Team discuss referral
- Team therapists meet family
- Therapists feedback to team
- Team meet consulting team
- Observing group give feedback
- Plenary – shared active-reflection

The use of so-called one-way screens for teaching has always been paramount in the development of training in family therapy. This gives us the added ability to offer observation of actual practice as well video taping the simulation for analysis and feedback. In this case a number of the conversations were recorded so that they could be played back for further reflections.

The teaching team listen to all of the conversations and offer a facilitative input. As we are experienced in a number of different contexts we hope to be able to maintain realistic links with practitioners working dilemmas.

The evaluations of this exercise by the group were overwhelmingly positive. There were a number of key elements worthy of mention here:

- The exercise created a different/more-connected level of appreciation of the group as a community of learning and therefore increased the possibilities for future learning.

- The exercise brought in a more tangible way the 'outside' in, and the potential for the 'inside' out in terms of transformation of practice and transfer of ideas.

- Participants were able to appreciate in vivo the notion of the systemic mind as revealed with, within and between them and their colleagues in the room/s.

Education as dialogue:

In our experience, this fundamental idea that has framed educational processes since Plato and Socrates may have to be re-learned in every generation and performed and practiced in every new opportunity for learning. As therapists we are influenced in how *our practice* and *thinking about our practice* influences *our practice and thinking about our practice and thinking as teachers*. A cooperative enquiry approach in many ways best describes what we find ourselves doing Reason [2001]. We have certainly become ever more aware of developing our programmes in ways which tend towards maximising the value placed upon both the experience which students bring in, but also on the experience of the here and now in the learning process and how they (and others with them) may access this experience as grist for the learning mill. The model emerging for us can be described in the following way:

1. Education as an orientation toward community.

We work largely with health and social care practitioners and we could agree that they constitute a disparate but interconnected community. The implications of using the levels of contexts Cronen & Pearce[1982] are important to consider, hence the utility of role, power, influence and professional responsibility are brought to the fore ground for deconstruction and new learning. The community development becomes a hugely rich and complex container for the learning process.

2. Education as experience

The learner becomes central to the process of engagement with the group, and the two become co-dependent, moving toward collaborative practices with all of the potential for creativity or in some cases destruction – energy to transform is released. This process has to be managed skilfully in order to maximise learning potential.

3. Education as imagination over knowledge

By creating contexts for learning we move beyond tired methods and move into imaginative spaces we become so called "imaginers" Disney [2006] building wider contexts giving attention to complexity but also giving time, respect and mutual learning space to free us up to creates communities of practice of learning of appreciation and change.

4. Education as transformation

In this emphasis on experience- in-dialogue the 'praxis' becomes transformative as suggested by [Friere 1972]. To speak, to utter one word is to open oneself to the possibility of change. Change for the student is unlikely to happen without some reflective change in the teacher and so it goes.

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And finally...

This short paper has attempted to capture one moment of teaching at the Family Institute within a packed year of teaching moments. We are excited with our student colleagues at the prospect of coming on courses which change their views about their practice, change their whole practice and sometimes change their lives, and ours too. A constructivist position is offered as the foundational springboard for our teaching practice. It remains somewhat unusual for psychotherapy trainings (particularly the clinical aspects) to be part of Higher Education Departments. Usually they are found in smaller franchise colleges independently funded and managed.

We hope that through such processes we can sow some seeds of how working with and appreciating difference in communities can grow with, within and between clinical and learning contexts.

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