

Playing, Reflecting and Reality

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This article is about our experience working with creative reflection as part of self learning. Everyone learns in a different way, and these learning styles are influenced by the way we were taught to learn at school and further education. But the greatest learning is when it is self-taught, rather than taught by the teacher or expert. When it is self-taught it seems to be integrated on a deeper level rather than just memorising. Our experience of introducing people to experiential work can open up an entirely new aspect of learning. We create a situation where the learner is allowed to experience something first, then analyse it, and finally come to their own conclusion. Carl Rogers is quite clear about the difference between teaching and learning. He explains self discovered learning has to be appropriated personally.

‘Self discovered learning, truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience, cannot be directly communicated to another. As soon as an individual tries to communicate such experience directly, often with quite natural enthusiasm, it becomes teaching’

Carl Rogers ‘on Becoming a Person.(1)

For both of us this has been true. We have studied with some excellent teachers who were very knowledgeable about their subject but we actually learnt very little. There is a huge difference between being a passive and an active learner. One of us had experience of sitting in university lectures feeling drowsy and un-stimulated. In later years when she started teaching she questioned this style and determined to find a more stimulating way of teaching adults. The other of us had lectures for half of her degree but got far more from the other part which was in Drama and was experiential. Later she went on to adopt some of these drama techniques when teaching adults.

We created Inspire Workshops five years ago after meeting in a supervisor’s peer support group. In the past the role of a supervisor might have been seen as similar to that of an over-seer or quality controller. In some situations this might be necessary, for example a student taking their first few cases in the final year of college. But if we consider supervision as exclusively the role of quality controller, this is missing the

opportunity to enhance the work on the deeper and wider level. The quality controller has to work with the immediate situation, like dealing with an acute situation. If we see supervision as the art of facilitating someone's self-development, using their self-reflection as the key tool then we're helping them for all of their future work. Through this process of active self-learning, their skills and confidence increase, their work becomes more professional and both they and their clients benefit.

Reflection has been around for many years and has been used by professionals in all walks of life. It can be experienced in the moment, or retrospectively. All busy professionals have the ability to reflect in action. This means making quick, intuitive, spontaneous judgements while they are working, or dealing with a client, and adjusting their behaviour accordingly. Reflection on action is a retrospective process, demanding that time is set aside after the event to consider what has happened, and what to make of it.

This commitment to learn from their own strengths and weaknesses, their own achievements and mishaps, is a useful part of continuous professional development .

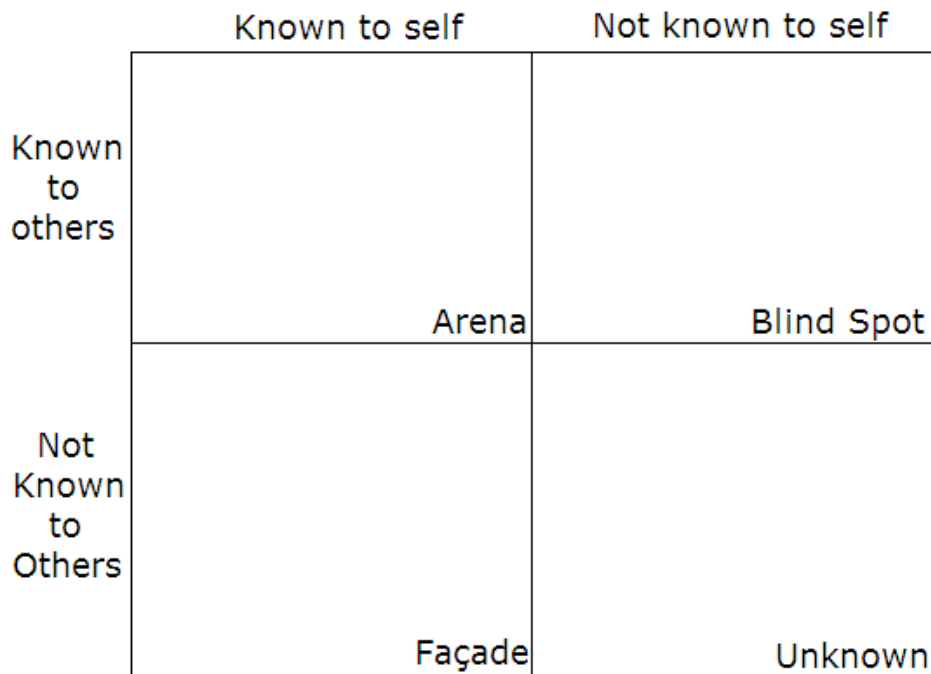
Reflection on action can be done alone at home. Indeed, there are many circular models available that help you process what has happened, through a series of questions such as : what happened, what do I think and feel about it, what conclusions can I draw, and what is my action plan? Alternatively Gibbs Reflective Cycle (2) can be used.

But it can be argued that reflection does not truly come into its own until there is a second person available, to reflect back or act as a non-judgmental observer. Reflecting on your own can provide great insights, but it can leave the way open to self-justification, self-blame or simple avoidance of painful conclusions. Reflecting with someone else to reflect back, can lead to deeper truths. The presence of the other person encourages a fuller exploration of what has happened, and a clear vision about conclusions on the way forward. This person can be a professional supervisor, mentor, or a colleague working under a facilitating supervisor.

Another reason for the necessity of a second person to enhance self-reflection, is the fact that some things are hidden from us however hard we search. The model of the

Johari Window shows us that there are some parts of ourselves that we deliberately keep private from others; and other parts of ourselves that are completely unknown to us. In order to illuminate this unknown area we need the help of another person. As our self knowledge deepens through the reflective process the known arena expands and the unknown one diminishes. (see diagram) (3)

Johari Window



In the Inspire Workshops we work together to facilitate groups, encouraging them to work experientially as a tool for self reflection. We divided the day up into short sessions, that might at first appear to be more fun than work. But after each short experience, participants are encouraged to discuss what they have discovered, or make notes for themselves, and take it further.

We use symbolic expression as aids to reflection. For example we use: fantasy, imagination, meditation, drawing, writing, toys and play. All of these are used as triggers to deepen understanding of the self and the work. Often people come to us with a seemingly insurmountable problem; one that they have discussed and thought about at

length. Using a lateral approach which harnesses the creative side of the brain to access the unconscious they can find an answer. We do not provide them with the solution per se but enable them to access their own solution through a creative process. As one excited participant said 'I did not know that I knew it'.

An example of this is when a practitioner came to us wanting to discuss a confrontation that happened with her line manager at work. She was deeply upset by this, and admitted it was not the first time it had happened. We could have spent a lot of time discussing the incident intellectually, unpicking the details and analysing what happened. Instead we got out the basket of toys, bricks and animals and asked the practitioner to make a representational scene.

The practitioner chose a large fox for the line manager, and a small owl for herself. Then she put in a sheep, a bear and several dogs behind the fox, and built a brick wall behind the owl that represented herself. We were able to understand the situation in minutes and the facilitator confirmed this by describing the scene as she saw it, saying 'the owl appears to have its back to the wall, while the fox has a supportive and strong team behind it. It seems to me the owl is in a difficult position'. This reflection allowed the practitioner to reflect deeply on the dynamics shown there. The facilitator then asked the practitioner if there was anything she would like to change in the play scene. After some deliberation she put the owl on the top of the wall over looking the fox and its team. The supervisor asked what that felt like and she said 'much better. I feel lighter, a sense of relief'.

Having got this image from the session she was able to go back to her work and make some subtle shifts which enabled her to feel better in relation to her line manager. She no longer felt hemmed in by the manager and could take a wider view of the dynamic. We could have discussed an action plan, and made suggestions about how she dealt with the manager in future. But the beauty of using such direct and visual description of the dynamic, means that it is possible to trust that the new perception enacted out in the play scene would be paralleled in real life.

As Mooli Lahad says in his book *Creative Supervision* (4)

“The use of interpretation will be almost nil, unless requested by the supervisee. Most of the time, introspection and lateral reflection are encouraged as a way to jointly investigate the “product”. At times we also use the gestalt approach of exploration and listening, such as personifying an object and letting it explore itself, its surroundings, etc. This is how we usually start of journey into creative explorations”

If we take a moment to consider how an intellectual mode of supervision would have taken place, we can see a stark contrast. In the first place it would have taken more time, as the practitioner would have had to explain the details of what happened, and who said what. This is important, but in a sense it is only the story, and not the dynamic of the situation. The dynamic can be expressed through many different media. And it is the dynamic that is the problem. The intellectual supervisor might be tempted to be prescriptive, or informative, and try to persuade or advise the practitioner what to do. But once again, this is helping to deal with the acute, and not enhancing the practitioners self-development and ability to deal with similar situations when they happened in the future.

In working like this the facilitator has to stand back, and trust the process. There is not the satisfaction of having provided the answer. There is not even the satisfaction of understanding the details of the story. But the changes that happen within the participants after this work can be very profound. In our experience playing and fantasy can open a deeper understanding and influence changes in real life situations.

There is an unnatural division between the world of fantasy and science. The brain is divided into two equal halves one of which, the left, deals with logical scientific and linear thinking and the other, the right brain is creative, intuitive and lateral thinking. Our work takes participants into the creative right brain. Working on this side of the brain can be extremely insightful, using intuition and being able to trust it. The answers can come effortlessly with a triumphant “ah-ha!”. .

Every workshop that we run starts with a group contract and careful laying down of boundaries. This is important as the participants could feel quite vulnerable as they work with the unconscious. They need to feel safe and respected by their peers and the facilitators before they embark on the work. The group contract or working agreement is

written up on a large piece of paper, and remains pinned on to the wall in full view throughout the session.

Marianne Schneider Corey and Gerald Corey say:

“We are convinced that confidentiality is essential if members are to feel a sense of safety in the group. Even if nobody raises questions about the nature limitations of confidentiality, we still emphasise importance of respecting confidential character of the interactions within the group.... one way to create this safe and trusting environment is for the group members to be willing to verbalise the fears, concerns, and here and now reactions.” (5)

One of the issues that we frequently come across working with alternative health practitioners is that of charging. We could give a left-brained lecture on the benefits of charging. Instead we ask them to sit quietly and meditate on their family messages about money. Simple as this is, it will open out enormous insights, into current behaviour patterns. But self-knowledge is not always enough to change attitudes, so we usually take this into further experiential work. We might take this into group work or role play where they practice giving and receiving money in the roles of patient and practitioner. On one occasion this role play ended up with the patient paying the practitioner more than the practitioner had asked for, in appreciation of the wonderful consultation. The practitioner believed this role play on such a deep level that she started to believe in her worth. As a result of the workshop, she gained confidence, put her fees up and her practice went from strength to strength.

Providing an experiential workshop, like the Inspire Workshops, means that the effect of the work is multiplied through the group learning, and group reactions.

One of the things that we have noticed is that when people are unhappy with their work they begin to talk about it very negatively. Conversely successful people seem to be always talking with enthusiasm. Which comes first, the enthusiasm or the success? We believe that changing someone's thinking means that the positive action will surely follow. Just as negative thinking can deplete success, so positive thinking can create and increase success.

With this in mind we have devised a number of exercises. One of these is to look at the following picture and to ask everyone in the group to say what they see.



The group will immediately become aware of divergent thoughts; for some the cup is half full, for others it is half empty. Having recognised this, the challenge for us is how to change the cup from half empty to one that is half full. One of our techniques is to ask everyone to give a two minute sell of their work in turn to everyone else. This group activity generates high energy, cheerful laughter, and a sharing of ideas. It works on several levels. The experiential energy that goes into doing this exercise embeds a memory that selling is fun. The repeated listening to others, and making their own personal sales pitch allows everyone to develop and polish a good advertising strategy, which improves self-confidence.

In our workshops we encourage practitioners to be inventive and to use their imagination to understand their unconscious side. It is an effective way of uncovering the hidden area in the Johari window. In doing this they can develop as practitioner, increase their self-confidence, and become more professional.

Mooli Lahad again:

“I have found this particularly suitable in situations where the supervisee is “stuck”, or where there is resistance or a tendency to rationalise. In these types of situations, this approach can be used to empower people to cope with difficulties by strengthening

introspection and visualisation of concepts and problems. It introduces the experiential-emotional approaches to supervisees who tend to intellectualise, through finding latent internal creative resources.”(6)

Creative and experiential work is a fast and accurate system of self-reflection. The use of symbolic expression allows a level of understanding that is deeper than words; like a Gestalt it frees the practitioner and something changes in them in that moment. Those around them will sense this and will treat them differently. The power of this simple tool is unexpectedly profound in this technological age.

- (1) Rogers, Carl : On Becoming a Person: Constable 1967.
- (2) Gibbs : Reflective Cycle 1988
- (3) Luft, Joseph : Group processes: Mayfield Publishing Company 1963
- (4) Lahad, Mooli : Creative supervision: Jessica Kingsley publishers 2000
- (5) Corey, Marianne Schneider and Gerald : Groups, process and practice: Brooks/Cole, Thomson learning 2002
- (6) Lahad, Mooli : Creative supervision: Jessica Kingsley publishers 2000