

Every Person Matters

Developing Reflective Practice as a Life Skill

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**"I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship." –
Louisa May Alcott**

I have worked as a freelance for over twenty years. One day in 2000, an incident at work left me dwelling unhealthily on what I perceived were my professional failings. The problem was that I dwelt only on the negative aspects of the incident and I found it increasingly affecting my professional self-confidence. I realised I needed support different to that proffered by friends, family and colleagues. I needed to be able to articulate challenging issues for myself; I wanted to grow and learn professionally whilst contending with the challenging nature of the work and I wasn't looking for therapy.

Professional supervision was recommended by two colleagues, both recent converts to its benefits. I have been seeing a supervisor ever since. Within the first eighteen months I noticed an increase in self-confidence, I had attended two training courses and effectively changed some unhelpful thinking processes as a result of the monthly sessions.

My supervisor is trained as a counsellor, psychotherapist and drama therapist. I meet with her for an hour and a half every month. What follows is based on my experience with her and on the methods she employs.

Professional supervision is a positive and challenging experience. Based on a 'person-centred' approach, the core elements of the relationship between supervisor and practitioner/s are

- Congruence
 - that words are in line with feelings
- Unconditional positive regard –
 - that there is respect and liking for each other.
- Empathy
 - that each understands the essential feelings of the other.

In such a space, the individual is able to look closely at what they do and how they do it. He or she can

- explore problem solving – work through difficult practice-based issues,
- explore the interface between personal and professional,
- plan and develop professional practice,

- recognize the emotional implications in the work.

“...By developing the ability to explore and be curious about our own experience and actions, we suddenly open up the experience of purposeful learning – derived not from books or experts but from our work and our lives. This is the purpose of reflection: to allow the possibility of learning through experience, whether that experience is a meeting, a project, a disaster, a success, a relationship, or any other internal or external event, before, during or after it has happened”

Joy Amulya, Centre for Reflective Community Practice, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Supervision encouraged me to continually reflect on my working practice. I began to seek out everyday opportunities for reflection – not only for myself, but also for colleagues and the children and young people with whom we work. Now, at the primary school arts and emotional literacy project that I work on, we treat reflection as standard activity in all aspects of the project:

- Children reflect at the end of every session. Using a structured conversation method, every child gets the opportunity to voice fact, feeling, opinion and to make a decision based on their experience that day.

“...This is good because I’m setting my own targets”

“I just feel wonderful when I’ve got a piece of work in front of me and I’m like – whooaa I an’t done that! I’m just shocked at how good it is. It feels like I’ve just hit the sun!”

- Reflection at the end of a project/term encourages children and staff to look back at the journey and see how far they have travelled and the experiences they had en route.

“People have interesting ideas: Different from mine, different than in other lessons. Ideas in the other lessons get better.”

“They have confidence, but sometimes it’s the adults who can’t handle it”

“The children’s language has been hugely improved. The way they talk to each other, and the vocabulary that they have got..! e.g. ‘resourcefulness’ and ‘being brave, because...’ The discussion has deepened.”

- ‘Special Books’ are used to record all of the information – one of the project staff always scribes whilst the children talk and staff document their own sessions. Some staff also keep personal journals. The project has built a considerable library of information,

proving invaluable to its evaluation.

Importantly, reflection demystifies teaching and learning for children. It breaks down the conventional approach of teacher/facilitator as giver, child/young person as taker of information and gives the child much more opportunity to contribute and to help set the agenda for further learning.

There is a growing interest in the promotion of philosophy and thinking skills for children and young people.

The philosopher and academic Stephen Law has recently been tackling the questions 'How do we raise good children? How do we make moral citizens?' He suggests

'the skills to be cultivated should at least include the ability to:

- reveal and question underlying assumptions,
- figure out the perhaps unforeseen consequences of a moral decision or point of view,
- spot and diagnose faulty reasoning,
- weigh up evidence fairly and impartially,
- make a point clearly and concisely,
- take turns in a debate, and listen attentively without interrupting,
- argue without personalizing a dispute,
- look at issues from the point of view of others, and
- question the appropriateness of, or the appropriateness of acting on, one's own feelings."

What a different place the world would be if adults and children alike were thus skilled for life...

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Amulya, Joy 'What is Reflective Practice?' The Center for Reflective community Practice at MIT 617.253.3216 crcp@mit.edu

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