

Up Close and Professional

Integrative Reflection in Theory and in Practice

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For Sarah

anam cara

and in memory of

my father

Acknowledgments

I am a pilgrim, a wayfarer and walker of ancient paths. In Spanish, the pilgrim route is *el camino* (the way). It was on the *Camino Frances* in 2013 that I finally knew I needed to embark on this research. On numerous occasions since, I have likened this journey to the experience of limping along that road. It is said that you must walk your own camino but that you could not walk it without others. I have discovered the same to be true of this PhD journey. Accordingly, I acknowledge the support and assistance of a host of good people. My academic supervisors, Barbara Pamphilon, Janet Smith, and Steve Shann have been so generous with their time and feedback. They have been true guides on this journey—patient and insightful. When I wandered and was disorientated, they gently steered me back. Where would I be without their wise oversight? I hold them in high regard.

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on *personal* dimensions of practitioner learning. More specifically, it investigates a method I call integrative reflection, a process that invites, guides and supports practitioners to reflect deeply on their ways of *seeing* and *being* as a means of continuing professional development.

In the past forty years, much has been written about reflective practice, about the scope of various phases of reflection (for example, reflection *in* and *on* action) and about the purpose of different modes of reflection—*instrumental* reflection for problem solving, *critical* reflection for assessing assumptions and hegemonic interests, *imaginal* reflection for accessing ‘other ways of knowing’, and so on. However, few have attempted to synthesize these differing modes of reflection in support of a more comprehensive form of learning. Moreover, there remains a tendency to overlook the question of how to engage skillfully and appropriately with the *person* of the practitioner, with the particulars of their perceptions, actions, and reactions, and how these affect (and are affected by) their work.

In my own work of facilitating reflective practice with groups of pastoral practitioners, I had sought to engage these issues—synthesising different approaches and refining a method for enacting this ‘up close’ form of reflection. The decision to undertake this research came in response to challenges I was facing as a facilitator of these groups. I wanted to understand the process more fully, including what constrained and enhanced participant learning. The study is informed both by relevant theoretical material and insights emanating from inquiry into my experience of facilitation.

In its use of recursive cycles of action followed by phases of in-depth reflection—iterative report writing and dialogue, including with a critical

reference group—this qualitative, practice-based inquiry resembles action research. In its commitment to grapple with the meaning of my experience of facilitation in two practitioner-learning circles, and its rhythm of immersion, incubation, explication and creative synthesis, it resembles a heuristic inquiry.

Over the course of inquiry, my understanding of integrative reflection has been challenged and complexified. At the level of theory, the thesis shows how differing modes of reflection necessarily inform and enable each other. At the level of practice, the thesis shows how supporting practitioners to reflect in this holistic way is itself a complex matter. The aim is to encourage personal growth and professional learning. Yet, it can be challenging for practitioners to become aware of where and how growth is necessary. Participation is affected by a range of factors including, importantly, matters elucidated by theories of adult development. In the light of this, the thesis argues that the process of integrative reflection needs to be enacted empathically and facilitated in a way that ‘lives’ the tension of seeking to encourage growth by attending, in the first instance, to participants’ current ways of seeing and being. I describe this as *being with* ‘what is’ in the service of what is ‘not yet’. The detailed exploration of this insight and of what it means for facilitating the process has resulted in a more nuanced understanding of the theory and practice of integrative reflection. In turn, this contributes to a fuller appreciation of how reflective practice can function as a means of professional development.

The findings of the thesis will be pertinent to anyone who is concerned to support practitioners, particularly in the ‘helping professions’, to learn how their ways of seeing and being affect (and are affected by) their practice, and to work in ways that are self-aware and responsive to the needs and opportunities of their context. Practically speaking, it will especially serve those seeking to facilitate groups that foster practitioner development through reflective learning.

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