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Personal Agendas: Reflective Practice in the Context of Diversity

- The personal voice and presence of the informal educator in relationship and conversation with young people is a major resource of practice. This demands a commitment to reflective practice.
- Reflective practice must take seriously the existence of power-charged diversity in working relationships.
- A case study of reflective practice in the context of diversity is developed using the Johari window.
- Methods of reflective practice, including giving and receiving feedback and the use of practice journals, are discussed.

Practitioners bring their own personal agendas into practice, their own starting points, prejudices and assumptions. The explicit professional agenda of youth and community work is the flourishing and development of young people and of their communities. The core purpose of youth work is 'the personal and social development of young people through informal education' (Merton et al., 2004). Alongside this professional agenda, everyone also has personal passions, preoccupations and prejudices which form a personal agenda. The extent to which these agendas are visible both to practitioners and to the people with whom they work needs to be a matter for regular reflection. In particular, our ability to recognise and take steps to counter prejudice in ourselves, or to recognise limitations in our knowledge and understanding, is vital. 'Reflective practice must take seriously the context of "power-charged diversity"' (Haraway, 1991b; Palmer, 2002). The educators must be educated.

Motivations for informal education

Some of the most powerful motivations for involvement in youth and community work occur at a non-rational level. Informal education engages our passions and

emotions as well as our thoughts. Such motivations may remain hidden from the practitioner for a considerable time.

For example, the question of which groups of young people we are drawn to work with and why is interesting. The answers are not always immediately obvious. Why do some practitioners find themselves drawn to particular so-called 'hard to reach' groups, such as young offenders or young people suffering mental health difficulties? Why do some women and some men enjoy working on issues of gender with women-only groups or men-only groups while others prefer to work in mixed groups of men and women? These questions of liking and preference are not simple or entirely rational. However, they can and ought to be made explicit and explored. In undertaking such reflective practice, the committed practitioner begins to disentangle their own motivation and agendas for engaging in the work from those of the young people, who do after all have their own agendas. Reflective practice is well supported by regular supervision, which is now established as an essential support to the work of therapists and counsellors. It should be regarded as equally essential to those working in informal education projects with young people (Hawkins and Shohet, 2003).

It is often suggested that to be professional means to be objective and neutral with respect to the agendas of young people, for example the question of what they have reason to value. Others argue that this stance leads to a powerful denial of personal investment in professional identities. The consequence of such denial is that the impact of powerful personal investments on others remains closed to scrutiny. Youth and community workers need to be as aware as they can be of their own perspectives and motivations if their work with young people is to be freed to support the young person's own decision-making and flourishing. Paradoxically, the recognition of personal agendas on the part of practitioners is the best method of avoiding imposing them on young people. It is of course possible, while being completely unethical, deliberately to operate with a covert agenda: seeking converts to a particular faith or political cause for example. The method of 'reflective practice' discussed in this chapter offers a professional framework which challenges covert working.

'Conscious use of self in relation to others' connects the professional identity of the youth and community worker with their personal identity, and enables them to become resourceful in relation to the identity struggles of the young people they are working with. Reflective practice needs to be developed in ways which address issues of identity, power and conflict.

The 'conscious use of self in relation to others'

The 'Johari window' is a commonly used starting point for the exploration of self. Drawing on psychodynamic models which understand the self as divided and formed in both conscious and unconscious ways, the four areas of the Johari window offer a starting point for reflective practice. They provide a method for exploring prejudices or assumptions based on lack of knowledge. They also provide a means for challenging the denial of the importance of 'difference' and 'power'.

The Johari window

Quadrant I. The area of free activity or public area, refers to behaviour and motivation known to self and to others. This will include the open professional definitions of the work in which the youth and community worker is engaged

Quadrant II. The blind area: here others can see things in ourselves of which we are unaware. This can include both strengths and weaknesses. It is the place in which both positive and constructively critical feedback can be hard to receive. The extent of our personal lack of self-awareness of course shifts as a result of feedback, and changes over time, and in new situations and contexts. No one is ever fully self-aware.

Quadrant III. The avoided or hidden areas, represents things we know but do not reveal to others (e.g. a hidden agenda, or matters about which we have sensitive feelings). This may well include personal matters which might be judged harshly by others such as personal histories of ill health or of mental health difficulties, personal knowledge of drug cultures, prejudices or behaviours about which we have been confronted in the past and which reflect badly on us.

Quadrant IV. Areas of unknown activity, in which neither the individual nor others are aware of certain behaviours or motives. Yet we can assume their existence through experience because of the situations in which it eventually becomes apparent that some previously unknown and unrecognised behaviours and motives were influencing our relationship all along. These are often not easily available to our consciousness, or there is a block in our understanding of them.

The four quadrants draw attention to material that is open to self and to others, available for public discussion and conversation; material that is available to self and not to others about which we choose to remain private yet recognise as influencing us; material that is available to others and not to self, our 'blind spots'; and lastly, and arguably most powerfully, material that is available neither to self nor to others but which is operating unconsciously and present non-verbally through jokes, slips of the tongue and other non-conscious levels of communication. One of the most complex features of the use of the Johari window for giving and receiving critical feedback is in relation to a *shared unawareness* in which giver and receiver are complicit. It is possible to use systematic attention to feelings of uncertainty or sensitivity to begin to probe and explore such areas, as the following hypothetical case study is designed to show.

The Johari window in the context of diversity: a case study

A diverse team of women workers is proposing to develop work with Black young men. The broad aims of the work include the opening up of opportunities for further education to Black young men, but the specific project details and 'outcomes' are relatively open. Using the Johari window could open up discussion of the impact of diversity in the following ways.

The first quadrant: Open and free activity. The language of the professional

In professional policy language, there are commonly used racialised and politicised references to groups. The term 'Black and Minority Ethnic Communities' is commonly shortened to 'BME' in professional talk. The term 'diverse' is also used euphemistically to refer to the same groups. Each of these terms points to the existence of power struggles in which issues of 'race' discrimination have been made visible and yet not fully engaged with.

Racial discrimination is discrimination based on skin colour or other commonly designated 'racial' attributes. The term 'race' is placed in inverted commas to show that it is a social construction arising from racism, not a biological category. 'One race, the human race.'

Probing the exact understanding of the term 'Black', when it is used as part of the term 'BME' is essential. It was originally a political marker claimed by communities of African heritage who experienced racial discrimination on the basis of skin colour. In the often-used pairing, 'Black and Asian' it may seem that some communities are referred to by skin colour and others by culture. Similarly the term 'Asian' needs investigation. If 'Asian' designates an 'ethnicity', in what sense is it a minority ethnicity? To whom do the people designated 'ethnic minorities' become visible as 'minorities'? If particular people are designated as 'diverse', who are the people who are not 'diverse', who are just 'themselves'? The invisibility of 'Whiteness' in policy documents (other than in the census and therefore in the sampling categories of research projects designed to investigate some aspect of 'diversity') supports its dominance. 'Whiteness' occupies the invisible norm. 'Others' who are from Black and minority ethnic groups are addressed as 'special interest' groups, potentially seen as 'lacking' and pathological, rather than structurally disadvantaged.

Even if a team of educators wishes to situate themselves as neutral professionals, they cannot in fact escape being positioned by a racialising and politicising discourse (Delgado, 2001). As professionals, members of the team recognise one another as such. But the term 'Black professional' has come into existence because of an exclusion operating in the category of 'professional'. The assumption has been that a professional is 'white' unless otherwise stated. A member of this team of women workers who is positioned as 'Black' may experience her professionalism as being questioned by those she works with in a different way from her white colleagues.

The space of professional discussion is proposed as a space of open and free discussion. A major task is to extend this space of open communication and to transform its terms, whether in staff teams or with young people. In this case, staff have taken on a particular role in relation to widening participation, are being paid for what they are doing, and are reasonably expected to undertake their work with honesty, reliability and in a spirit of fairness. This code of ethics is open and visible. The professional space is concerned with access to higher and further education. There is a body of resources in the form of space, time, money and learning opportunities. There is power: the power of the gatekeeper to open and close doors of opportunity. And in consequence there are opportunities to engage in inter-professional settings in order to challenge discourses which render Black colleagues invisible and likely to be perceived as 'unprofessional'.

The second quadrant: The blind area. Making 'whiteness' visible

Whilst the problem of 'class' in education is well recognised, especially in relationships between schools and some predominantly working-class communities, the fact and meaning of 'colour' has been much less often discussed professionally. Particularly for those team members whose 'colour' is not a common reference point, and who are participating in the privileged invisibility of 'whiteness', 'colour' may appear insignificant. They may never have used racialised language to describe themselves, and may not even be aware that the sense of 'colour' and the ascribing of meanings to 'colour' happens 'all ways', not just in relation to Blackness. However, even if they do not see themselves as 'white', they are likely to be perceived as such by the young men they are proposing to work with, who in turn are quite accustomed to seeing themselves and to being seen by others in terms of 'race' based on appraisals of skin tone.

Being 'inside our own skins', it is not easy to gain a sense of how we might be seen by others, although it will be more obvious to people who have been subject to racism. In this project, attention to 'masculinity' is also involved. Seeing ourselves as others see us also involves seeing across the 'difference' and potential attractions and hostilities of gender. Both 'whiteness' and 'masculinity' have historically been associated with dominance, and so, in this context, each group—the team of women workers and the young Black men who are to be involved in the outreach project—has been constructed, in dominant representations, as potentially threatening to the other. Being aware of the existence of these constructions means that we are in a better position to undermine and challenge them in our relationships. It also leads to an explicit recognition of the ways in which the Black women members of the team are positioned to act as *bridgers* who may enable the work to happen.

A significant shift can then be made away from notions of the 'neutral professional' and towards a more situated perspective. This enables a sense of the strengths and limitations from which not just individuals but the team is working. A team who can recognise the significance of the discourses surrounding 'race', femininity and masculinity as well as class can hear new things, which either open up or close down conversation and informal learning.

There may be a choice to downplay the significance of meanings and topics associated with 'race' and 'difference' and to find points of connection, such as shared interests and enthusiasms or shared investments in the life of a particular neighbourhood or city. Alternatively, the conversation can explicitly engage with issues of 'race' and racism in order to form an alliance in an anti-racist project of for example desegregation of provision, or positive affirmative action with the young men. What each of these strategies seeks explicitly to move away from is a position of 'whiteness' as natural and taken for granted superiority and the consequent positioning of non-whiteness as subordinate, marginal and excluded. In order to do this, it is necessary to see 'whiteness', to be prepared to see ourselves and our contexts as they appear to others, to denaturalise all that seems natural and normal. It is not only important to *see* 'whiteness'. It is important to *hear* and take in information about the consequences of 'whiteness' as a form of superiority. 'Being proud to be white' and 'Being proud to be Black' are not equivalents in a society that has historically privileged 'whiteness' and stigmatised 'Blackness'. Yet the need to have a sense

of self-worth and a sense of identity in which we can feel some pride and belonging is an important one in all communities, however they have been 'coloured'.

The third quadrant: The avoided or hidden areas. Don't make assumptions

It is likely that the gender of a team of women workers is visible to all, yet it is wrong to assume that this automatically creates a set of shared meanings. The presence of a group of women is open to a number of conflicting interpretations, which are not immediately visible. Some women may see their womanhood as not very important. They see themselves first and foremost as individuals doing a job alongside men as equals. To others, being a woman seems a restriction, a source of frustration, and is accompanied by a sense of injustice and inequality. To still others, being a woman is first and foremost about being a mother. These are different repertoires in which an account of their gender can be given. The team of women practitioners might perhaps be a group of feminist or womanist practitioners, or women of faith, or all of these. As well as the potential different ideological and philosophical interpretations of gender that might be present, there is likely to be a range of personal experiences that are not necessarily immediately visible. Some of them are part of African-Caribbean heritage families. Such themes are all part of potentially hidden agendas and tacit knowledges, but when made explicit they offer potential sources of knowledge and information for the practice of informal education and potential bridges into conversation.

One of the most difficult hidden or avoided areas is that of uncovering or exploring prejudice. The consequence of living in a world that has been structured historically by racism and sexism and class is the existence of an enormous repertoire of prejudices and stereotypes. As committed practitioners, we despise such prejudices and regard ourselves as liberals and thus may find it very hard to acknowledge the part that such prejudices have played in our own formation. Yet there is no one who has been untouched by prejudices about 'others' and it is important that this is acknowledged, not in order to produce 'confessions of guilt', but to free the space for educational activity.

Becoming aware of how our own cultural background, including the unfounded assumptions and prejudices, as well as the resources, of that background, influences our practice is an essential. The tendency to assume non-prejudice rather than to examine and attempt to deconstruct prejudice is powerful in professional groups, who are all too ready to seek to challenge prejudice among the groups of young people with whom they are working. This is a major block to good practice. If we seek to tackle prejudice in informal conversations with young people, we must first of all address prejudice in ourselves. We need to recognise the roots of prejudice in lack of knowledge, but also in fear, and in prevailing ideologies which support division. It may be possible to excavate the well-denied experience of prejudice among professionals by asking questions such as 'Who would it have been most difficult for you to take home as a potential partner?' 'What was the prevailing view of this (frequently stereotyped) group in the family you grew up in?' 'Name ten stereotypes that you are aware of about the groups you are working with.' Being aware of the capacities of such prejudices to continue to influence us even when we wish to disown them is a significant contribution to neutralising their power.

The fourth quadrant: Unknown activity ... Only joking!

Finally, reflective practice can seek to engage with powerful material on the edge of consciousness, not available to self or to others at the level of consciousness but making itself felt through lapses in communication, through silences, jokes, slips of the tongue, non-verbal communication, in metaphors and figures of speech and even in dreams. This is the landscape of emotion, in particular of desire and repulsion, attraction and disgust, anxiety and fear, passion and commitment, guilt and shame, anger and joy, attachment and rejection. Such feelings are all too rarely spoken about. Practitioners need to ask themselves questions such as 'How are you feeling about what is happening here?' It is particularly important, in the context of safe anti-oppressive practice, to be alert to feelings of isolation, feelings of being overwhelmed or bombarded and feelings of being threatened. Such feelings should signal the need to seek out support or 'time out' from the pressures of practice.

Informal education as a practice always engages the emotions. Practitioners must be able to recognise and name emotional work as part of professional practice. Intuitions, hunches, feelings that have yet to be given a name are highly significant. Informal education practice is not therapy, in that it does not seek to work primarily with unconscious material. It is however essential to recognise the power and presence of such material. Why do some situations make us passionate while others, objectively equally important, leave us cold? What do we find exciting and what frustrating about the work we are undertaking? What makes us feel uncomfortable, even ashamed?

In the example we have been investigating here—a diverse team of women workers setting out to undertake a project of outreach work with young Black men—emotions of attraction, empathy, care, and pride as well as, potentially, fear and guilt might all be anticipated. If such feelings are named, they can be recognised and made to work for the project.

It may be recognised that some feelings are so powerful as to make the piece of work a non-starter. Guilt in particular has been noted and analysed as a significant block in attempting to create inter-cultural or inter-racial² communication. Guilt quite often paralyses action as it focuses emotional attention on the guilty person. It leads one to become self-absorbed. In this it differs from another related emotion, shame at injustice, which, it is argued, propels those who experience it towards acts of justice and restitution. A further danger lies in the potential for the dynamic of the roles of persecutor/victim/ rescuer to become the key dynamic. This version of 'solidarity' has been a common one in the past, particularly in charitable work. It has been seen as itself a pattern of cultural racism, reinforcing the superiority of 'whiteness' in situations in which there is someone, usually Black, to be saved and some-one, usually white, to do the saving (Ahmed, 2004).

Bringing such issues to consciousness enables the space for critical practice to develop further. Silences, gaps, hesitations are of the utmost significance in the development of understanding. These breaks in communication indicate the times and places where a new perspective is breaking through, where there is room for such a new direction to emerge.

Giving and receiving critical feedback: questions, contexts, cues about diversity

Supervision of practitioners in training is a key aspect of professional formation in which critical feedback is given and received. Giving and receiving critical feedback is not easy and it is sometimes therefore avoided.

Discussion Point

Check out the position you are coming from, think about the position other people are coming from, does it hold water—if not why not? (Issitt, 2000)

How do you decide if someone's position holds water?

Supervision is one of the most powerful contexts for the kind of reflective practice outlined above but it is not the only one. The identification of 'critical friends' also enables practitioners to engage in reflection. The question of 'whiteness' was first raised in informal education in the context of the questions raised by practitioners working from a Black perspective. In relation to anti-oppressive practice and a commitment to working across diversity, it is invaluable to draw on the perceptions of practitioners with whom common professional values are shared but whose situation and perspective is clearly different from one's own. A number of models of 'Black and White co-working' and 'male and female co-working' suggest this (Mistry and Brown, 1991). Gaining feedback directly from the group with whom you are working is also important, as material for professional evaluation and reflection.

Common blind spots which have been identified in the struggle to move away from the denial of diversity include avoidance, especially an avoidance of really engaging with people we perceive as 'different'. There is also sometimes a reluctance to respond to the complexities of 'difference'. The people who are perceived as 'different' have their own range of conflicts, their own ways of constructing 'the other' which are not merely a mirror of our own. Finally there is a tendency to assume that non-prejudicial beliefs are already in place in our responses, rather than to actively check out reality. In becoming aware of the limitations as well as the strengths of our own 'situatedness', we can become aware of new possibilities for knowledge and conversation. Knowledge of the world, being up to date, involves reading widely, listening, viewing, accessing the internet, following debates, seeking out alternative points of view. We need to be aware of histories that might matter to young people, particularly the working-class histories, cultural histories and community histories that do not fit with dominant market-based agendas. Informal educators have to be alert to emerging new themes that enable people to make connection with one another.

The sort of questions that can be used in the context of supervision or reflection with a critical friend become part of the conversational repertoire of the youth and

community worker. They include open questions, asking about feelings and impressions. Probing and exploratory questions can lead to an the exploration of mirroring and of here and now feelings which pick up on and repeat back the sense that the supervisor is getting from the supervisee: perhaps a sense of uncertainty, or confusion, or stuckness, or feelings of enjoyment and excitement and inspiration.

Taking our time

A number of steps, used systematically, free up space and time for reflection. In particular, regular meeting with a reference/resource group which has been constructed to enable peer reflection from diverse perspectives, and which therefore requires a move 'outside the comfort zone' of everyday practice is recommended. The use of a daily journal with a variety of writing methods, including writing in the third person, methods of free association on significant themes, using metaphors or images opens up creative thinking and creative space. Choose a perspective and imagine the situation from that perspective. It is especially useful in this regard to undertake explorations from the point of view of the least visible or marginalised participants in the situation. Creative thinking arises from provocation and challenge—the challenge to see anew, or to see differently or to change perspective.

In the context of often unrealistically pressurised timescales, taking time for thought is a vital element of creating the space for reflective practice. This involves both creating time and creating spaces, as well as noticing the spaces in which reflection can and does already happen.

It is often at the margins of busy schedules and crowded offices and meeting rooms that such time and space is found. It nevertheless needs to be valued and acknowledged as the creative space which it is. It is through the commitment to setting aside time and withdrawing from the hurly-burly that critical practice can emerge.

What kind of thinking is implied here? Certainly at times it may be analytic thinking, the development of an argument, the pursuit of a deeper understanding through engagement in practice. But, just as often, it is a process of creative thinking which involves seeing and engaging from a new point of view. Change the angle. Develop a vision. Step back. Let go. Allow yourself to be provoked into new ways of seeing and new directions for conversation.

Creative thinking can also enable a vision for practice to emerge—to let through the possibilities implicit in the work, leading towards new forms of practice and possibility. It therefore must involve a deconstruction, a letting go of what exists in the present in order to make room for new forms: a step back from what has been made already in order to see it in a different light, in order to bring about change.

This chapter has emphasised the importance of reflective practice to youth and community workers and has explored what this could mean in the context of power-charged diversity. The case study of a diverse team of women workers working with Black young men highlights the potential for creative practice which arises from systematic reflection. As well as supervision, the use of critical friends or reference groups with diverse perspectives on the work being undertaken is recommended, as is the valuing of space and time for reflection through the use of

creative methods of journaling. The act of 'stepping back' creates the space to see work anew.

Key Terms

Supervision and **Critical and reflective practice** are terms used throughout the 'helping professions' to refer to a fundamental professional approach which requires self-awareness and accountability for interventions in the lives of others.

'**Race**' is placed in inverted commas to refer to the social divisions based on racist evaluations of skin colour and other physical markers or on racist constructions of cultural difference. Other important concepts such as **transcultural** and **power-charged diversity** relate to this context in which 'race', along with other aspects of identity, is constructed as a significant difference through which power relationships are established.

Further Reading

Haraway, D. (1991b) 'Reading Buchi Emecheta', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books. Donna Haraway's work explores the changing nature of power in a networked world. This essay introduces the concept of 'power-charged diversity' in an educational context.

Haug, F. (1987) *Female Sexualisation: Memory Work and Politics*. London: Verso. Frigga Haug's use of personal reflection to explore power relationships—called 'memory work'—is introduced in this book.

Hawkins, P. and Shohet, R. (2003) *Supervision in the Helping Professions*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. A very useful general introduction to supervision.

Milner, M. (1986) *A Life of One's Own*. London: Virago. An inspiring account of journal-keeping as a source of discovery.