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Reflexivity and the Guidance Counsellor



Reflexivity is one of those buzz words that gets bandied about in a field such as guidance counselling. It is not always clear what is meant by it. It might be of some help to unravel the term “reflexivity” somewhat and see what it might have to offer guidance practitioners.

Self awareness

We believe that self-awareness is a basic skill for anyone involved in the practice of using counselling in the course of their work (Rennie, 2004; McLeod, 2007). Reflexivity requires us to be aware of our own experiencing as we sit with a client and that we also have the capacity to translate that self-knowledge into effective action on the clients' behalf.

Complexity and understanding

But, since we operate in highly complex settings and we are ourselves complex beings who are socially constructed – how can we be sure that our reflections are not simply a confirmation of our own narcissistic thoughts and opinions? How can we rigorously reflect on what we do in such a way that develops our thinking, critiques our positions and challenges us to imagine other possibilities? For Etherington reflexivity is a key skill of the practitioner that facilitates us to think through this complexity. Reflexivity involves:

‘An ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices

about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world.’ (2004, p. 19)

Reflexivity, then, is the capacity to be aware of ourselves in the practice of listening to another person, the capacity to use what we are aware of in that listening in the service of the client while at the same time being critically aware of our own frames of reference and the extent to which they are interfering with or facilitating the work we are doing with a client. This requires the practitioner not only to listen to the client and to themselves as they listen, but also to the wider organisational, community and social contexts in which they find themselves. From this perspective, reflexivity is a practitioner's attempt to turn their awareness to whatever is happening in any given moment at a personal, interpersonal, organizational and societal perspective and to use that to illuminate the psychological dimension of their work.

Reflexivity in action

So, how do these ideas translate into practice or are they just ‘lovely concepts’ we use in our ‘ivory towers’?

Recently, in partnership with a VEC, we ran a series of three day workshops called 'Fostering the Emotional Climate of the School' aimed at teachers in the surrounding area. The workshops were planned in response to a recent number of young suicides in the area. Suicide is difficult to comprehend but particularly so when a young person is involved. It provokes feelings of despair, hopelessness, powerlessness, loss, confusion, impotence and more. Among the many questions raised by suicide are, 'if only I had realised, if only she had spoken, if only I had listened, if only I had intervened.'

In our initial discussions planning the workshops we became aware of a pressure 'to know', to come up with the 'expert position'. We realised that our feelings of needing 'to fix' the problem were a mirror of the feelings of the teachers. We felt that instead of maintaining a fantasy that there are ready-made solutions, that we could provide teachers with a safe space to talk about their own emotional responses to the situations they found themselves in, how it impacted on them and to explore ways of responding. We wanted to trust that people have the resources and knowledge to respond appropriately to emotional stress if they have space and time to feel, reflect and think.

Over the days of the facilitated workshop, teachers talked, listened and shared their experiences and knowledge. Arising from the dialogue emerged the beginnings of hope, of finding different ways to promote emotional well-being and to respond to distress. There was less pressure to have templates and protocols, and more acceptance of tuning in and listening to oneself and in turn being able to listen to others, particularly the young person. If you can find your own agency and hope, then it is possible to support others to find theirs.

When the workshops were over we met with the workshop facilitator, to reflect on the workshops and

make sense of the experience. One of the themes to emerge was the importance of vulnerability as an indicator to emotional well-being. In our discussion we noted how the 'tyranny' of the secondary school timetable was a constant theme through the workshops: it was a challenge to get time to come to the workshops, where does all the time in school go? The school timetable, while providing structure and content works against dialogue, listening to one's own concerns and the concerns of the young person. The 'tyranny' can mean that the timetable becomes more important than the students and the teachers and it can take a major crisis, like suicide, to disrupt this. One way to respond creatively to the 'tyranny' is to actively create spaces for talking and listening in schools. A commitment to talking, listening and relating supports the process of learning and development. If we can take the time and space for meaningful dialogue, the school community knows within itself how to promote emotional well-being. If no time is given, is it any surprise that a crisis will emerge?



Supervision and staying 'attuned'

We all need to develop the capacity to sift through the flux of our experiences on an ongoing basis to be able to discern what our feelings and experiences are telling us about ourselves, our clients and our world. But, the chances are that the guidance counsellor's experiences are also a reflection of a wider social and political reality – we are practicing in a time where people feel adrift in swamp of hopelessness. Once again, unless we can recognise, contain and accept our own feelings, usually in skilled supervision, we will be unable to help a client to do so.

So, have we positioned reflexivity as yet another demand on the practitioner's time? We suggest that reflexivity is an opportunity to maintain our freshness and vitality in a challenging role. It is a disciplined commitment to regular and skilled scrutiny to one's practice. But, without the eyes of others who are practiced at seeing the layers of both personal and institutional power, we are likely to continue to tell ourselves whatever story we want to hear. To be reflexive is to make the familiar unfamiliar, to question the taken for granted assumptions and positions. It is this challenge that keeps us alive to our own growth and development, to curiosity and imagination, a prerequisite to our capacity to facilitate the same in our clients.

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