



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Observation as a structured learning journey for novice facilitators

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Abstract

Context: When establishing the first practice development school in Switzerland, it became evident that there would be a need to support persons wishing to become facilitators so as to ensure the sustainability of practice development. From this need was born the role of observer for novice facilitators. This was inspired by the idea of learning through observing an advanced facilitator as a complement to the theoretical knowledge gained from practice development literature and the practical skills stemming from practice development schools. It is based on the Critical Ally conceptual framework.

Aim: To describe the genesis of the role of observer and to trigger a dialogue based on this experience, as well as to encourage other countries in a position similar to Switzerland in terms of practice development to consider this observation model.

Implications for practice:

- The observer role can play a significant part in supporting the novice's learning process, especially in countries at the beginning of the practice development journey
- The results may be used as a template for supporting the development of facilitators alongside the range of practice development foundation schools and literature
- The observer role also supports the continuous learning process of experienced facilitators in that the observer acts as critical ally

Keywords: Observation, critical allies, embodiment, embodied knowledge, pathic

Background

In 2015, the first practice development school in Switzerland was founded, and this required the development of capacity in facilitating a practice development foundation school. The need to build relevant knowledge in the country brought with it the need to create and develop a role of novice facilitator. The observer idea arose as a way to introduce novice facilitators to their new roles and support the development of their capacity to facilitate foundation schools. Gaining knowledge about facilitation in practice development is a complex process that requires a broad range of qualities and skills (McCormack et al., 2004). It demands a willingness to reflect creatively in order to progress in the learning process and also to explore the self (Kinsella, 2017). A novice facilitator's learning process is a synthesis of theoretical knowledge and practical skills in facilitating group processes. In addition to theoretical and evidence-based knowledge, a novice needs to develop the ability to establish a space for a group to develop a creative process.

In the context of this article, an experienced facilitator means one who has carried out the role in more than one practice development foundation school and who is able to apply the principles of active learning within the school. Additionally, their training must be based on practical experience in their daily work activities. Experienced facilitators may act as role models, notably for novice facilitators observing them as they work.

The approach to facilitating a group and the methodology employed to do so have different drivers. On one hand, there are methods and instruments used to facilitate the learning process. On the other, the ways of being and the use of techniques by a skilled advanced facilitator may also be driven by embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p 144), which can entail an almost intuitive understanding that allows one to do the right thing at the right time. Embodied knowledge cannot be found in a written text or in theory yet it can influence how an advanced facilitator acts in the group process and, as a consequence, impact on the learning process of the group. Therefore, observation may be understood as a way to access embodied knowledge, and for that reason may serve as a crucial creative source in a novice facilitator's observational learning experience.

Practice development is a process based on the Person-centred Practice Framework (McCormack and McCance, 2017), which aims to promote work that is collaborative, inclusive and participative (the CIP principles) and to create a person-centred culture. One outcome of this culture is human flourishing (McCormack and Titchen, 2014). The four 'core modes of being at the heart of person-centredness' are set out by McCormack and McCance (2017, p 17) as: being in relation; being in a social world; being in place; and being with self. To my mind, in practice development schools' current curriculum these aspects of supporting novices to move into the role of advanced facilitator are not sufficiently considered; the learning process could be improved by including and involving the four core modes. Novice facilitators could benefit from learning holistically from different perspectives, engaging a critical creativity (McCormack et al., 2014; McCormack and Titchen, 2006; Titchen and McCormack, 2010) that may be a keystone in this learning process. This may also lead novice facilitators to an emancipatory form of knowing (Chinn and Kramer, 2008); these authors describe the route to emancipatory knowing as a process that includes different steps and dimensions (p 12). In their conceptual model of the fundamental patterns of knowing, they distinguish between four fields: empirics, personal, aesthetics and ethics. Empirics involve theories and formal descriptions, which lead to scientific competence. Personal refers to personal stories and the true self, which lead to a therapeutic use of the self. Aesthetics involve criticism and works of art, which lead to transformative art/acts. Ethics involve principle codes, which lead to moral/ethical conduct and attitude.

Chinn and Kramer (2008, p 6) argue:

'The integrated expression of emancipatory knowing is praxis, which produces changes that are intended to be for the benefit of all. We emphasised "integrated" because the action and reflection of true praxis must be based on all knowing patterns in order to be effective.'

This may be exactly the kind of knowledge a novice facilitator needs to develop to reach the level of an advanced facilitator, or even an 'expert' (Benner, 1984). The novice may have to deepen the level of all four of Chinn and Kramer's (2008) fundamental patterns of knowing, with the learning process taking a path that does not consist solely of theoretical study but may also include the practical phenomenological observation of an expert facilitator and additionally observing others in their learning process.

Alongside this acquisition of knowledge on a multidimensional level and of skills in facilitating, the learning may be a two-way process, with an observer's critical questioning and feedback helping to build the abilities and skills characteristic of the experienced facilitator. And as McCormack et al. (2013) state: *'...to give and receive feedback to and from each other...also began to build greater team effectiveness'*. This suggests a crucial aspect of the observer's role is derived from the theoretical

Critical Ally framework (Hardiman and Dewing, 2014). This conceptual framework triggers a learning process based on critical questioning and self-reflection. It provides and enables progression in the learning process of facilitators (Hardiman and Dewing, 2014, p 6).

To put these theoretical aspects in a practical context, I'll share my experiences as an observer in the following section.

Creating the role of observer

I was one of three observers during the second practice development school Switzerland, in 2015. In the year before I joined the foundation school, I had been looking for the chance to participate in an advanced school. I was interested in deepening my abilities as a facilitator and was asked, along with three others, to consider the potential of acting as a facilitator in a foundation school in Switzerland.

The experienced facilitators of the school, who had already been selected to facilitate the foundation school, invited us to participate in four preparatory workshops for the school. Each half-day workshop focused on the 'daily theme' of the foundation school and we sat together to brainstorm and draft the school's content. In the first workshop each experienced facilitator shaped a partnership with one of the observers, who acted as a critical ally. The pairs were asked to prepare one of the subsequent daily workshops for the school. This included using all the aspects of the conceptual framework (Hardiman and Dewing, 2014, p 7) and led to an intense learning process, mainly for the advanced facilitators, through the feedback from the observers.

These preparation activities for the school were based on the nine principles of practice development (McCormack et al., 2013; McCormack and McCance, 2017) and enhanced with creative methods for practice development (Dewing et al., 2014). As well as coming up with the details for the school's schedule, the role and the practical outworking of the observation was discussed. After each half-day, the observers were asked to report their observations and provide the experienced facilitators with feedback as part of the latter's personal preparation. This took place in a variety of ways, sometimes involving oral presentations, but it also included creative feedback methods. The time was also used to try out innovative and perhaps unconventional methods of presenting matter to the group, with sharing back to see whether it might be appropriate for the school; this gave the observers experience of giving feedback in different ways. This was a fantastic experience for the observers and the experienced facilitators. The preparation time was a safe space in which experiments and direct feedback were possible. Both the observers and the experienced facilitators found these experiences to be supportive and useful as preparation for the school week.

The art of observation

My experience in the role of observer showed me that observation goes far beyond simply sitting and watching. Before the school began, we jointly defined the tasks for which observers would be responsible. As well as observation, these included: providing feedback to the group after observation with the group's permission; providing post-session feedback to the advanced facilitator alone; providing feedback at the end of the day to the facilitation team; participating in creative feedback to the group each morning; and, finally, drafting the school report to be sent to the International Practice Development Collaboration (IPDC). Within these activities the observer acted as a critical ally for the advanced facilitator. It was also mutually agreed during the preparation workshops that the observers would have no co-facilitation role. Before each workshop session I had to define, in consultation with the advanced facilitator, what I would be observing and which method of observation I would be using. At the start of each session the group was also informed by the experienced facilitator that I would primarily be observing the facilitator – it was important for the group to understand that the facilitator was being observed and not the group itself. However, when group members were asked for their consent, they were also asked if they would like me to observe the group and receive feedback.

Even though I didn't directly facilitate the group, my involvement became increasingly demanding. Here, I had to draw on my theoretical skills about evaluation and feedback methods. My task was to provide feedback to the advanced facilitator as a critical ally; but also at the end of each day I was required to evaluate the day and provide feedback about the points of observation previously agreed together. This was challenging, especially on those occasions when the group process did not go well.

I kept a creative journal of my observations and activities so that I could crystallise my learning journey and later have the option of drawing on and benefiting from my insights when acting as a facilitator myself. However, I realised that good observation calls for a wide range of skills. There was a dire need for theoretical skills in practice development, the ability to be present in the moment, to adapt according to the moment's requirements, and to be open to reflect on self. Furthermore, it required listening between the lines. In my view, van Manen (2007) used the term 'pathic' for this phenomena. In thinking about pathic, he suggested:

'...knowledge does manifest itself in practical actions. And we may "discover" what we know in how we act and in what we can do, in the things of our world, in our relations with others, in our embodied being, and in the temporal dimensions of our involvements' (2007, p 22).

He further wrote:

'...there are modes of knowing that inhere so immediately in our lived practices – in our body, in our relations, and in the things around us – that they seem invisible' (2007, p 22).

And Pallasmaa (2017) argued:

'Learning a skill is not primarily founded on a verbal teaching but rather on the transference of the skill from the muscles of the teacher directly to the muscles of the apprentice through the act of sensory perception and bodily mimesis' (2017, p 15).

In relation to the topic of the observer role, this means it requires the simple observation of what occurs in the moment between the experienced facilitator and the group. This allows the observer to try to get a sense of the embodied knowledge guiding the experienced facilitators' decisions during the group process. In these moments it seemed observation may also be an art, an art that brings together parts of acting into a picture. As Chinn and Kramer wrote about the art and aesthetics of nursing:

'Art is not limited to the fine arts or what often is labelled as art. Rather, art is present in all human activities that involve forming elements into a whole' (2008, p 130).

Discussion

It's only recently that the practice development school in Switzerland has begun to implement the role of observer. Arguments for not having an observer include that it can disturb the group, and that the experienced facilitator may perceive the observer as a co-facilitator, finding this detrimental to the group process. In addition, there is a view that the novice facilitator learns best by participating as a facilitator, rather than by observing. All these arguments have their legitimacy. However, for fledgling facilitators the role does offer a valuable chance to take a stride forward in their learning process and to deepen practice development skills. Trainee facilitators can be usefully supported by having a role model to learn from and by their observance of how experts practice the skill of facilitation. Our experience also showed that the observer may contribute positive support to the creative learning process of a group and the experienced facilitator. It demonstrated a positive effect on the learning process of novice facilitators and also on the advanced facilitator, but the conditions in which an observer is brought in and the tasks they will be expected to perform need to be carefully discussed

and clear to all participants. In addition, the observer has to be aware of the prerequisites of the role, which involves far more than taking a seat and watching. It entails participation in advance preparation of the school, theoretical skills, enlightenment, self-awareness and the ability to be present in the moment. It also requires openness to self-reflection.

Conclusion

The role of observer in a foundation school must be structured and explained to the group. This unlocks its creative learning potential for and between the novice facilitator, the experienced facilitator and the group. The learning for the novice and the advanced facilitator during the practice development school has the potential to benefit the practice development school curriculum. This potential may be a subject to be presented to and discussed with the members of the IPDC.

As a result of my experience I would like to share what conditions helped me at that time, acknowledging that they may differ from those of others:

- Before the school, the conditions required for the observer and the tasks they will carry out should be discussed and agreed
- The observer should be included and involved in the school's preparation
- The observer should not act as a co-facilitator during the school
- Regular creative sharing of observations between the observer and the advanced facilitator should be scheduled throughout the school
- The role and tasks of the observer should be discussed at the beginning of each group session
- The novice facilitator commits to each group session based on the theoretical model for which she or he will be providing feedback to the experienced facilitator and/or to the group
- The observer should be included in the daily creative feedback to the group
- The novice facilitator should create a learning journal during the school week, based on critical creativity

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