

# Using Relational Reflexivity as a resource in Teaching Family Therapy

by

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With thanks to the PG Diploma 2007 Trainee Group for their evaluations.

Submitted as a short paper  
for the Teaching and Training Section  
Journal of Family Therapy

Submitted to [www.blackwellpublishing.com/journals/joft](http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journals/joft)

On 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007

## Abstract

In this paper we talk about creating coherence and transparency in the relationships between teacher, model of adult learning and subject taught. We describe how we have made connections between adult learning theory and family therapy to generate resources for action in teaching on the qualifying level course at Northumbria University. Using an recent teaching session and the voices of trainees, we illustrate these connections with an example of teaching about Relational Reflexivity, using methods which enabled us to generate reflexive 'flow' in the learning context.

## CONTEXT AND SETTING

As family therapy educationalists we are invited to create coherence between educational approach used to teach and the subject taught. In adult learning, Kolb's model is often privileged and has also been criticized for constraining opportunities for 'reflexivity', an outcome which may result in learners 'feeling labelled or stuck in a particular approach to learning' or 'trapped in... (a) learning style" (Race 2001 p3). At the same time, Kolb's model has also been used without this disadvantage. What makes the difference? Is it possible that stuckness might be generated in the relationship between the model and the person applying it? We became curious about the influence of our relationships when teaching about family therapy 'theory' which is not constructed as separate from practice, but as engaged in a reflexive relationship. In order to overcome a context of 'incommensurate discourses' (McNamee and Gergen 1999) between teaching practices and 'knowledge's' taught we considered what other educational resources are available to us. In this paper we talk about adult learning in a context of relational reflexivity (Burnham 1993, 2005) and share an example of how RR has been used as a resource for teaching theory at Northumbria University.

## WHY THE IDEA DEVELOPED

Race, a higher education consultant (2001) offers a reflexive, systemic construct for adult learning which he calls '**Ripples on a Pond**' (2001:10) which has the potential to enable coherence between learning constructs and the

discourses being taught. He suggests that 'imposing (Kolb's) cyclic order...is a gross over-simplification'. We prefer to use RR with Kolb, rather than 'abandon it'. Like Kolb, Race proposes that learning is multi-directional, emerging from a combination of processes that overlap. He talks about these as processes of **'wanting' to learn, 'needing' to learn, 'doing' learning , 'digesting' learning and 'feedback' about learning** which influence each other in spreading and recursive 'ripples' (2001:11). In this way learning is constructed as continuous, reflexive and interacting processes stimulated across multiple levels through connections between inner and outer contexts of experience.

Jeanette has created a connection between this model of adult learning and the notion and associated practices of relational reflexivity in family therapy in order to avoid 'imposing' an alternative construction of learning or 'setting aside' Kolb. Generating reflexivity or 'ripples on a pond' across and between positions or domains of learning might enable movement towards coherence. John (Burnham 2005, p4) has described relational reflexivity as:

*"The intention, desire, processes and practices through which therapists and clients explicitly engage one another in coordinating their resources so as to create relationships with therapeutic potential. This would involve initiating, responding to, and developing opportunities to consider, explore, experiment with and elaborate the ways in which they relate."*

Within Races' 'approach', 'doing' teaching would involve the generation of fluid, continuous and reflexive processes connecting inner and outer experiential contexts. Relational reflexivity offers a 'method' in which we might invite participants into a dialogic relationship with knowledges' offered within the course. This connection opens the door for the educationalist, to a rich array of 'techniques' from family therapy and systemic practice as relational resources for generating conversations in which education can happen or develop.

The following exercise is an example of how we have used relational reflexivity in teaching about 'knowledge'.

## DESCRIPTION OF TEACHING METHOD

- John's model of Relational Reflexivity (2006) is described, incorporating his four quadrants of Resources, Restraints, Problems and Possibilities (Burnham 2007)
- One participant takes a position as consultee on a case/issue they have brought for consultation with the group
- Trainees form small groups representing different positions for listening:
  1. What Resources are identified within this story
  2. What Restraints are identified in this story
  3. What Problems are privileged in this story
  4. What Possibilities are latent or emergent in this story
- An interviewer facilitates the consultees' narrative and elaboration of aspects of the story, particularly transition points
- Following the interview, each group constructs 2 or 3 reflexive questions (Tomm 1987, Burnham 2006) from their listening position, making connections across transitional contexts. For example:
  1. *What questions would you have liked us to ask that would assist you to think about this case in a relationally reflexive way?*
  1. *What resources from other contexts may be available to you in this context?*
  2. *What kind of relationship would you like to have with the possibilities you have mentioned so far?*
  3. *If we asked other voices about additional resources and possibilities what might they identify?*
  4. *In what way does this case/issue embody hopeful stories about yourself as a family therapist?)*

- Each group asks their questions followed by consultees responses and reflections on the influence of the questions on their narratives in this case.
- Whole group discussion reflecting on observations of the influence of feedback on therapists stories about themselves as family therapists.

## **EVALUATION OF THE EXERCISE**

### **Some reflections made by the PG Diploma 2007 Trainee Group.**

- It just flowed
- The process of several co-constructed conversations either building on one question or in parallel was very generative.
- With a number of possibilities I mind, the quadrant in particular appeared to lend itself to mapping how the conversation and thinking progressed from first order to post modern conversations.
- I found the exercise very interesting and generative and after initially lamenting my own lack of creativity and feeling inadequate, also recognized the enormous resource available to family therapists who do therapy together or find helpful consultation groups.
- Connecting inner and outer voices, reflexivity and discussion was generative and enabled multiple perspectives.

## **SUMMARY**

The process of making connections between adult learning and resources from family therapy is not new. John originally wrote about relational reflexivity in a paper on supervision in 1993. We have extended this with an additional educational metaphor, Race's 'Ripples on a Pond'. This brought forth a context of coherence in the relationship between teacher, model of adult learning and subject being taught which could be shared in a transparent way with trainees, extending the 'flow' of reflexivity in recursive ripples within the learning context.

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